本好きの下剋上
司書になるためには
手段を選んでいられません
第一部 兵士の娘I
香月美夜
miya kazuki
イラスト：椎名 優
you shiina

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001Prologue

My name is Urano Motosu, and I am twenty-two years old. I love books. I really love books. I love books more than I love getting enough food.

I love how the printed words let me reach out and touch another person's ideas, their fantasies. My heart dances along the roads of thought laid down by the author, and I can't help but smile. Absorbing the vast knowledge contained within just a single volume always leaves me feeling like I've grown as a person. The whole wide world, which I have never seen with my own eyes, is at my fingertips, stacked neatly within the shelves of bookstores and libraries; isn't it intoxicating? The fairy tales of foreign lands, the glimpses of life in distant times and places, the reaches of every branch of history… when I absorb myself in a book, time evaporates around me.

Psychology, religion, history, geography, education, folklore, mathematics, physics, geology, chemistry, biology, art, fitness, language, fiction… All of humanity's accumulated knowledge and insight has been tightly packed into these books, and I love each of them from the bottom of my heart.

Encyclopedias, stretching to fill the entire shelf; the collection of literature, with every volume in place; specialty magazines that look so simple on the cover, but hold such advanced contents; colorful periodicals full of photographs; countless novels, written with fastidious prose; light novels, lacking any depth but still selling fantastically; huge picture books, intended for children; manga, the comics that are the pride of Japan; comics and magazines published by and for fans… the rustling of each turning page is more intoxicating than the finest wine.

I also love the smell of the darkest corners of the library archives, where the dusty, even a little musty scent of ancient books fills the air. Just slowly breathing in the smell of old books sends waves of ecstasy crashing through my body. The smell of new books is equally irresistible! The smell of fresh ink on new paper tells me that there is something new waiting to be discovered between those pages, and just thinking about it fills me with excitement.

I want to live my entire life surrounded by books. If I can, I want to spend the rest of my life in a dark, but well-ventilated archive, where the books are shielded from the sun's damaging rays. I'd spend every second I could reading, inseparable from my books, until my skin became ghostly pale, my body weakened from lack of exercise, and I forgot so many meals that I had to be pulled away by force. I want to die buried in books. I don't want to quietly pass on in bed! Being smothered to death by a mountain of books would make me so unbelievably happy.

…Well, I should use the past tense here.

Because, just a little while ago…! There was a big earthquake, and I was crushed to death underneath a pile of books! Maaan, really, out of all my wishes to grant, why this?

I really did want this, but I'm not really feeling like God did me any favors here. I had just

gotten my librarian certificate, and had somehow managed, in this age of unemployment, to find a position at a university library!

God, please. If I can, I'd like to be reborn. There's still so much more for me to read. Even in my next life, I want to read.

So, make me a librarian. Let me spend each day surrounded by books. Of course, I know that working as a librarian won't let me read all the time. It's a job, and I'll be busy, and I know that. But still, other jobs won't let me spend the entire day surrounded by books. Just being surrounded by books will make my happy. The intoxicating smell of ink and paper… who else could appreciate these feelings? Who else can feel this fluttering of my heart that occurs whenever I find myself looking back at all of this amassed history, these words written to preserve the insights of man, a uniquely human labor of the mind that is as old as writing itself?

If I can just read, that would be fine. Please, God. If you've heard my wish, please let me be reborn. When I am, I can read again.

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002A New Life

Bang! Bang! A sound like someone striking the floor or a table rattles me awake, as wherever I was sleeping starts to wobble back and forth. With every oscillation, a shot of pain blasts through my skull like I was being punched in the head, and I let out a small moan.

Shut up… please… shut up…

The irritating noises and vibrations didn't stop, continuing at a steady rhythm, not letting me sleep at all.

I'm kept awake, painfully aware of the vibrations reverberating within my spinning head. I plug my ears, hoping it will go away. Moving around feels strange, like my body isn't doing exactly what I tell it to. All of my joints are sore, and I feel feverish all throughout my body, like I'd come down with the flu.

"Ugh…"

I need my glasses if I want to figure out what's going on. With my eyes screwed shut, I feel around for the glasses I always keep near my pillow. My entire body feels a little bit numb, and my arm's movements are sluggish. As I squirm, something beneath me rustles with a sound like grass or paper.

"…what's making that sound?"

The voice that comes out of my mouth sounds too high, almost childlike. It might because I'm ill, but it's not at all the voice I'm used to hearing. Even though I want to do nothing more than sleep off this fever, I can't just ignore this many abnormalities around me. I slowly open my eyes. My field of vision is warped, thanks to this extremely high fever. I don't know if it's the tears in my eyes helping me see in place of my glasses, but everything is much clearer than it usually is.

"Eh?"

The first thing I notice is a ceiling that, while it may have originally been white, has been stained black with soot. Some number of thick, black beams hold it up, across which a spider has build an enormous web. This is absolutely nothing like any room I remember.

"…Where am I?"

I look around the room, keeping my head perfectly still so as not to shake the tears from my eyes. It's obvious, from what I see, that much of what's around me is entirely unlike the Japan in which I was born and raised. Just from the architectural style of the ceiling, this isn't a Japanese-style building, it's Western. Furthermore, it's not a modern, steel-framed construction, but something much older. The bed I'm on is hard, and there's no mattress beneath me. Instead, I seem to be lying on some kind of cushion made of a prickly material. Through the dirty cloth that covers it, I smell a strange scent. On top of that, my body itches here and there, like I'm being bitten by ticks or fleas.

“W… wait a second…”

My most recent memory is being crushed under the weight of countless books, and I don’t remember getting rescued at all. At the very least, I don’t think any hospital in Japan would put a patient on top of a sheet this dirty. Timidly, I try to raise my hand over my head so that I can see it, and what I see is the small, slender hand of a child. I live a lifestyle where I was shut indoors with my books all day, so the untanned and almost unhealthy skin was no surprise, but at twenty-two years of age my hands were, of course, those of an adult. Completely different from these small, malnourished-looking hands before me now. These small, child-like hands that I can open and close at will. As I move around, my body does not feel at all like I’m used to it feeling. At this shocking realization, my mouth goes dry.

“…What’s going on?”

It’s possible that I might have reincarnated. God might have heard my dying wish and given me new life, so that I may read again. This is incomprehensible. I want to know more about the world around me, so I lift my heavy head and slowly push my feverish body upright. My sweat-soaked hair sticks to the side of my head, but I pay it no mind as I look around the room. I see more bed-like platforms like the one I’m on, the dirty cloths on top of them, and a few boxes full of various things… but no bookshelves.

“There’s no… books…”

The only door in this room swings open. In an instant, the pounding noise reverberating through my head goes away, only to be replaced by the sound of footsteps as somebody outside bustles about. I really have no idea what’s happening. Based on the beams across the ceiling, the state of the walls, and the kinds of furniture in this room, I feel like this is something out of European history. There’s nothing around me to indicate modern civilization. Is this an extremely backwards country, or have I somehow slipped through time and wound up in the past? If only I knew; if I did, I’d have a lot easier time figuring out my next move.

“…Am I hallucinating in my final moments?”

As worried tumble around my feverish head, a woman appears in the doorway, having heard me moving around and talking to myself. She is wearing a triangle bandana tied around her head and is in her late 20s, judging by the condition of her once-beautiful face. Her general facial features are pretty enough, but all of the dirt ruins it. If she were to wash her face (and her clothes), she’d look half-decent, but it’s such a shame that she is the way she is now. Generally, I don’t worry too much about someone’s appearance (or my own, really) as long as they keep themselves clean; if they’re filthy, though, I really wish that they’d put a little effort in, otherwise their beauty just goes to waste.

“Maine, %&$#+@*+#%?” says the woman in a language I don’t understand.

At the sound of her voice, someone else’s memories burst through my consciousness, and I let out a small cry. In the blink of an eye, several years’ worth of memories crowd into my

mind. The sheer pressure of it feels like it's churning my brain to a pulp, and I grab my head in pain.

"Maine, are you all right? You didn't wake up for the longest time! I was starting to get worried."
"…Mom?"

A few memories bubble to the surface. The woman who came to check on me and is now gently stroking my head is my mother, and my name is Maine. I don't know how I suddenly started to understand what she was saying; this deluge of information has left my mind in shambles. Honestly, I wish this could have waited until I was feeling a little better. Sure, I wished that I could be reincarnate so that I could keep reading, and sure, it looks like I have, in fact, been reincarnated, but it's not like I'm just going to meekly accept that this woman in front of me is suddenly my mother.

"How are you feeling? It looks like you have a headache," she says.

The fingers of the hand she places on my forehead are stained with green and yellow spots. Does her job involve working with dye? I remember that workers back in Japan that worked with indigo dye had similar stains on their hands. I don't want to let this so-called mother, who I simultaneously know nothing about yet somehow remember, touch me, so I flinch away from her outstretched hand, bury myself in the stinking bed, and screw my eyes shut.

"…My head… still hurts. I wanna sleep," I say.
"Oh, rest well."

As my mother left this bed-filled room, I started to think deeply. Between the dizziness from my fever and the disarray in my head, there's no way I could just quietly get back to sleep.

"I'm not mistaken… I died, didn't I?"

Unbidden, an image of my own mother floats to the surface of my mind, and I silently apologize that I'll never see her again. She'll probably be furious, screaming "how many times did I tell you that you had too many books?!" while choking back tears of grief. I raise a sluggish arm and wipe a tear from my eye.

"I'm sorry, Mom…" I whisper, an apology that will never reach her ears.

I reluctantly let go of that image, and start to carefully sort through the memories of this child, Maine, that had been dumped into my head. Her latest memory was of having an extremely painful, painful fever, so painful that she couldn't bear it. It seems to me like, somehow, the Maine who used to own this body died, and I possessed it in her place. Oh, or maybe I was actually reborn in this world, and the delirium of the fever is causing the memories of my past life to resurface?

"It doesn't matter, either way. I'm going to have to live as Maine from now on, there's no way I can change it…"

Since that's the case, I need to sift through Maine's memories to learn more about the situation I'm in; otherwise, my family might start to get suspicious. However, no matter how hard I think, Maine's memories are those of a little girl with still-developing language skills, and there's a lot that her parents said that she didn't really understand. She didn't know what they meant! She's missing a lot of useful words from her vocabulary, so most of what she remembers is cryptic and ambiguous.

"Whoa, no… what should I do?"

From Maine's childish little memories, I've figured out what I do know. Her family consists of four people. Her mother is the woman who was just in here. She has an older sister, Tory. Her father has a job that's something like a soldier.

And, most importantly, this is not Earth. From the image in Maine's head, underneath the bandana that her mother was wearing, her hair is a rich green, like jade. You might think that she'd have to dye it to get it that color, but it really is naturally green. It's such an unnatural color that I almost kind of want to check to see if it's a wig. It seems really unlikely, though, that she would be some kind of cosplayer who always wears a green wig and dirty clothes; it's much more realistic to think that I'm in some sort of alternate dimension.

Incidentally, Maine's sister's hair is blue-green, and her father's hair is blue. Maine's own hair is a deep navy blue. Should I be grateful that my hair is close to black, or should I be sighing at my cosplaying family? Regardless, this house doesn't seem to have a mirror, and no matter how much I dig I can't find a clear image of what I look like, apart from my hair color. Well, based on what I know about my mother and father's looks, and what my sister looks like, I guess I don't look half bad. I'm also, without a doubt, filthy.

"Ughh, I really need a bath. …Do we even have one?"

Realistically, my appearance isn't my biggest concern right now, it's my living conditions. It seems like the family that I've been reborn into is mind-blowingly poor. Just from looking around, things seem pretty bad. The cloth that I, a sick child, am wrapped in is extremely threadbare and worn-out. Even for hand-me-downs from my sister, this is too cruel. I briefly thought that this might be some kind of abuse, but according to Maine's memories even her mother's clothes are sewn together out of rags, and her sister's are much the same. This is the standard for my new family. My father's work clothes are relatively solid, with only a few patches, but even so he was only ever provisioned one uniform, and that was several years ago.

On top of that, this house doesn't seem to be stand-alone. The wall closest to me is made of some kind of brick, and through it I can hear footsteps climbing up and down stairs and the voices of people who I presume are our neighbors. Perhaps this is some kind of housing complex or apartment building?

So, about this reincarnation business… aren't I supposed to be reborn as some kind of nobility, so that I don't have to worry about living a difficult life?

I breathe a heavy sigh at the rest of my conditions. I may have had a perfectly ordinary lifestyle back in Japan, but that was massively different to what I'm facing now. I don't know what era or what country I've been born into now, but Japan was a nice place to live, overflowing with wonderful things. Comfortable fabrics, soft beds, books, books, more books…

"Aaah, I want to read a book. Reading always helps my fevers go down."

No matter how dire my circumstances, I'll be able to endure it as long as I have books. I place a finger to my temple and concentrate, searching through my memory for books. Where in this house could the bookshelves be?

"Maine, you awake?" A voice suddenly breaks through my concentration. A girl, about seven or eight years old, is walking towards me with light footsteps. According to my memories, this is Tory. Her blue-green hair is carefully woven in a simple braid, but I can tell at a glance that it's extremely dried out and in bad need of washing. Just like her mom, she's a little dirty all over, and I really want her to wash up. She's wasting her adorable face.

I may be thinking that, but it's the opinion of an outsider from Japan, a country with a high standard of personal hygiene. Even if you're poor, you still want to maintain a healthy living environment; otherwise, you'll fall ill, then you have to see a doctor, then you've spent money you don't have.

I really don't care that much about that right now, though. There's exactly one thing that's on my mind.

"Tory," I ask, "could you bring me a '*book*'?"

Based on Tory's age, there must be about ten or so picture books in the house. I may need to be resting to get over this sickness, but I can still read. Reading books from an alternate dimension is, right now, my highest priority above all else.

"Tory, please!"

Tory looks blankly at me, her adorable little sister, with her head tilted to one side. "Huh? What's a '*book*'?"
"Wh… uhh, it's a thing where '*words*' and '*pictures*' have been '*written down*'…"
"Maine, what are you talking about? I didn't understand, what did you say?"
"I told you, a '*book*'! I want a '*picture book*'!"
"What's that? I don't really understand…?"

It seems like I might have accidentally used Japanese words in place of words that Maine doesn't know. No matter how hard I try to explain it to Tory, she just stands there with her head cocked to one side and a dumbfounded expression on her face. Even if I were to just say "get me a book" in Japanese, there's no way she would understand. I have to dig up this vocabulary, and fast.

"Ugh, fine! '*Translation function, engaaaaage!*'" I yell.

“Maine! What are you getting so mad about?!”
“I’m not mad! I just have a headache.”

Getting mad at Tory for not understanding me would be an extremely childish thing to do. … I did, though.

First off, I need to start focusing everything I’ve got to listening carefully to what people around me are saying and, little by little, start to memorize all of the words I hear. Between Maine’s young, flexible brain and my own 22 year old college graduate’s intuition, memorizing vocabulary should be easy… in theory. At the very least, if I think back on what I went through when I was learning other languages so that I could read foreign books, it wasn’t unmanageably difficult. The zeal and love with which I dedicated myself to my books was enough to drive other people away.

“…Are you angry because you still have a fever?” asks Tory. She reaches her hand towards my forehead, probably to feel my temperature. Without thinking, I grab her filthy hand before she can touch me.

“I’m still sick, won’t you get sick too?” I ask. Although I’m pretending to show concern for my sister, I’m really just trying to stop her from doing something disgusting. I really don’t want Tory to touch me with those filthy hands, so I’m employing this adult technique to avoid it.

“Oh, I guess so. Take care!”

Safe. If she were clean, she’d be a great older sister, but right now I don’t want to be touched at all. If this is the situation I’m in, then I’m going to have to pound the concept of hygiene into their skulls. If I don’t start improving things around here, I don’t think I’ll be able to survive. According to these memories, Maine has always been a weak child, and was bedridden and feverish far too often. I have too many memories of this bed.

If I’m going to be able to read to my heart’s content, I need to first make sure that I’m healthy and that my environment is sanitary. This family is way too poor, so if I get sick nobody will be able to call a doctor. Even if they did, from the looks of this place I can’t imagine they’d be any good, so I definitely don’t want to have to be in their care.

Mother calls from another room. “Tory, come help me with dinner!” “Yes, mother,” says Tory, and runs away with a pitter-patter.

Judging from the angle of the sunlight that streams through the window, it probably is time to start dinner preparations. Tory looks like she should still be in elementary school, but already she’s helping out a lot with the housework. What a state of poverty this is, for children to be relied on for manual labor.

“Ugh, this is bad…”

The thought of what my life will be like when I grow up is really depressing. No matter how I think about it, I’m going to be stuck doing housework forever. I’m not going to very much

time for reading. Housework was already a huge bother when I was still in Japan with all of its convenient appliances; is a useless woman like me who spends all her time reading even able to adapt to life like this?

Bang! Bang! An intermittent, lively sound reverberates through the room. Mom said it was time to work on preparing dinner, so that's probably the sound of cooking, but what in the world is happening out there? I can't see anything from where I am, but at the same time I really don't want to know that badly.

I have to stay positive! I'm not going to waste this reincarnation. There are books here to read that I could have never read on Earth! My first order of business is to take care of my physical condition. With that decided, I slowly close my eyes.

"I'm home!"
"Hi, Father!"

I hear clanging sounds, like metal plates rubbing against each other. My father has returned home, just in time for dinner. Maine is still too feverishly sick to eat, so I gradually drift off to the sounds of the happy family meal in the other room. As my mind slips into the dark, there's only one thought on my mind.

Ah, I don't care what it is, I just want to read a book.

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003Home Exploration

After three days, my fever finally went away, and I've slowly recovered enough to be able to keep some food down. What I've been eating has been finely chopped vegetables floating in bland soup. It's okay for now since I've been sick, but I don't think I'll be able to stand it once I'm healthy again. Also, I'm pretty used to being called Maine by now. I'm going to have to live as Maine for the rest of my life, so I need get used to it quickly.

"Maine, you done?" asks Tory as she comes in to check on me.
"Yeah."

I hand my empty dishes over to her, and quietly lie back down on my bed.

"Get some rest, Maine."

In these last three days, I haven't even left this room! I've only ever gotten up to use the restroom, and after that I'm always brought right back to bed. Isn't that too harsh? On top of that, I said "restroom", but it's really just a chamber pot kept in the bedroom. It's extremely embarrassing! Also, not only does the rest of the family use this same chamber pot, but when they're done, they just fling the contents out the window! And, of course, there's no bath, either! I couldn't stand it after a while and tried to wipe myself clean, and everyone looked at me as if I'd gone instane. This lifestyle… I can't take it anymore!!

It's not like I can do anything about it, though. As a very young, sick child, even if I were to run away, there's no way I'd be able to live the kind of life I'd want. I still have the mind of an adult, so this much is obvious. I'm not going to heedlessly run away, no matter how much I hate this situation. Judging from what I've seen in here so far, I don't think the outside is going to be much better. I have no idea if there's any child protection services or shelters or anything like that around here, and even if there were I don't know if they'd be any improvement over this place.

If I run away from the filth here, all that'll happen is that I'll spend my last few days running around the streets, getting covered in falling waste, and finally dying on the side of the road. What I need to do is focus on getting better so that I can then work on improving the conditions around here.

My first goal is to get well enough that I can get out of bed without people being mad at me. ……Well, it's a start.

Then, before anything else: books. The first step towards improving my environment is definitely finding books. If I have a book, then I'll be able put up with all of these grievances. I'll persevere! And, so, I have decided that today I'm going to go explore this house. I've gone too long without reading a book; I'm starting to feel the edges of withdrawal.

Give me a book! Raaagh! I'll cry! A grown woman will burst into tears in public!

Since I've got an older sister, I should be able to find around ten picture books somewhere

in here. Unless I'm mistaken, I don't think I actually know how to read this language, but at least I can look at the pictures and try to puzzle out the meanings of each word.

The door opens quietly, and Tory sticks her head in. "Maine, you sleeping?" she whispers. I lie quietly in my bed, and she nods in satisfaction. Every time I've woken up, I've slipped out of bed in search of a book, only to collapse as I wandering around, so Tory has taken it upon herself to keep a close watch on me. When our mother leaves in the morning to go to work, she leaves Tory in charge of my care. Tory has been desperately trying to keep me in bed, and with my tiny body, no matter how much I try to run I can never break free from her grip.

"I am absolutely going to *'dominate'* you," I mutter.
"What was that?" asks Tory.
"…Hm? Oh, I just want to get big."

Not really understanding the real meaning behind my answer, Tory gives me a troubled smile. "If you get healthy again, you'll get bigger! You're always so sick that you're not eating, so even though you're five, people still think that you're three."

Oh, am I five, then? With an atypically frail build. This is the first I've heard of it. I can't remember any birthday parties, so I couldn't figure it out for myself. Or, maybe, could there have been parties that I just don't recognize, since I don't know the language very well?

"Tory," I ask, "Are you big?"
"I'm six, but everyone thinks I'm seven or eight, so maybe I'm a little big?"
"Ahh."

We're only a year apart, but what a difference in physique. Surpassing her might be extremely difficult, but I can't give up just yet. I'm going to eat right, take care of my hygiene, and get healthy.

"Mom's gone to work," says Tory, "so I need to wash the dishes. Really, don't get out of bed! If you don't sleep, you won't get better, and if you don't get better, you won't grow any bigger!" "Okay!"

In preparation for sneaking out, I've been playing the good kid ever since last night so that Tory will let down her guard a little bit. I've been waiting patiently ever since for her to finally leave me alone and go somewhere else.

"Right, I'm going now. Be good and stay here, okay?"
"Okaaay!" I answer, the picture of obedience.

Tory closes the door with a clack. I wait quietly as she grabs the box full of dirty dishes and heads out the door. I don't know where she goes to wash the dishes, but she's always gone for about twenty to thirty minutes. It looks like each home doesn't have its own water supply, so there's probably a well or fountain for public use.

Heh heh heh… Now, get out!!

From what I think is the entranceway, I hear the clunk of a turning lock, followed by the fading sound of Tory's footsteps on the stairway. I wait until I can't hear her at all anymore, then quietly get out of my head. I grimace as I feel the grit of the floor bite into my bare feet. Walking around barefoot in a house where everyone wears shoes is profoundly disgusting, but Tory, in an attempt to stop me from walking around, hid my shoes, so I have no choice. Searching for a book is my top priority, I have no time to worry about the defilement of my feet.

"If they're in here after all, I might have spoke too soon…"

In this bedroom where my feverish self has been locked away, there are two beds, three wooden boxes full of clothing and other miscellaneous things, and a few baskets with other sundry items. In the basket next to my bed, there's a few toys made from wood and straw, but no books. If there's a bookshelf, it would probably be in the living room.

"Yyyuck…"

With every step I take, the gritty floor grinds into the soles of my feet. It's customary here to walk around the house with shoes on, so I know that even if I want to complain, it's not going to do very much good. Even still, the customs of Japan have been so thoroughly ingrained in me that it's going to be next to impossible to adapt. If I'm going to keep living as Maine, though, there are a lot of things I'm going to have to get used to.

"Grr, too high…"

I've hit the first major obstacle in my home exploration: the bedroom door. It's not as if I can't reach the knob at all; if I stand on my tiptoes and reach as high as I can go, my fingertips just barely brush the bottom of it. Turning it, however, is a much bigger problem. I glance around the room, looking for something to use as a stool. My gaze settles on the wooden box my clothes are stored in.

"Hnnnngh!"

If I were an adult, moving this box would be a piece of cake, but no matter how hard I push and pull, my little hands can't budge it. I could maybe flip over the basket that holds my toys, but it doesn't look like it would be able to support my weight.

"Man, I've got to get bigger soon; there's too much I can't do right now."

After looking around the bedroom some more and thinking over my options, I decided to try folding up my parents' bedding and standing on that. There's absolutely no way that I'd let my own bedding touch this grimy floor that people walk on with boots, but my parents are used to living in conditions like this so it's absolutely fine to use theirs. If it's for the sake of finding a book, making my parents a little upset is no big deal at all.

"Hup!"

I stand on my tiptoes on top of the folded bedding and grab the doorknob. I twist with the

entire weight of my body, and the knob turns. The door swings open with a creak… right towards me.

"Wha?!"

The door swings right towards my head with great force. I frantically let go of the knob, and stumble backwards.

"Who-o-o-o-a!"

With a clatter, I tumble off of the piled-up bedding and hit my head.

"Ow…"

I clutch my head as I rise to my feet. I notice that the door is still slightly ajar! My headache is only just another sacrifice to the cause.

"I did it! It's open!"

I leap forward, stick my fingers into the crack, and pull the door the rest of the way open. I see that my parents' mattress has slid across the floor, and it's left a clean track behind it… but I'll pretend not to notice for now.

"Aha, the kitchen!"

I leave the bedroom and find myself in a kitchen. "Kitchen" in the modern sense of the word might be a little, generous; this really looks more like an old-style cookhouse. In the corner I see a stove, with a cast iron pot sitting on top, and something that looks like a frying pan hung up on the wall next to it. A clothesline runs across the room, from which a grimy-looking cleaning rag hangs. Anyone trying to wipe something off with that rag is surely only going to make it worse.

"It's no wonder I've got a weak constitution with sanitation like this…"

In the center of the room is a somewhat small table, two three-legged stools, and a box that seems to be being used as another stool. On the right side of the room is a wooden cabinet, probably being used as a cupboard. In the corner opposite the stove sits a large basket, filled with raw vegetables that look almost like potatoes and onions. There's a sink here as well, with a large jug of water next to it. The sink is probably filled by pouring water from the jug; it looks like there really isn't running water here.

As I finish looking around the room, I notice two more doors besides the one leading back to the bedroom.

"Ohoho, which one is the right one?"

This kitchen really doesn't look like the kind of place where I'd find a bookshelf, so I open one of the other doors that head out of the kitchen.

“Hm, a storage room?”

Beyond the door is a room that’s crammed full of a mess of tools and things that I’ve never seen before. Everything’s on shelves, but things are piled on them so haphazardly that it doesn’t look like anything in here is used very much at all.

“Wrong one, huh…”

I give up on this room and head over to the second door. I reach up and pull on the knob, but the lock only clunks dully against the frame. I rattle the door again and again, but there’s no sign of it giving way at all.

“Don’t tell me, this is the door Tory went through…? Eh? Both were wrong?! Neither were right?!”

Suddenly perplexed, I mumble aloud to myself. This is a two-bedroom apartment with a kitchen… but no bath, no toilet, no running water, and *no bookshelves*. No matter how hard I look, I can’t find another room.

Hey, God, do you have a grudge?!

In all of the light novels out there about reincarnation, the vast majority of them dropped the protagonist amongst the rich and noble, and very few of the remainder place her in abject poverty. I have the memories and sensibilities of a modern-day citizen of Japan; there is no way I’m going to be able to live in a house with no bath, no toilet, no running water.

On top of that, the thing that I was most worried about: I can’t find any books. I looked all through the storage room and couldn’t find anything even remotely resembling a book.

“…No way, are books expensive?”

On Earth, before the invention of machines that could print books easily, books were ridiculously expensive. If you weren’t a member of the highest echelons of society, your opportunities to read books were few and far between.

“I’ve got no choice. If it’s come to this, right now, I need to find *words*.”

Even if I don’t have any books, it’s still possible for me to start learning to read. There could be newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, calendars, even advertisements! There absolutely has to be something around here that has at least one word written on it somewhere.

At least, there would be in Japan.

“…Nothing! Absolutely nothing! Not a single thing! What kind of house is this?!”

I have gone through every item on every shelf of the storage room and the cupboard, and not only have I, of course, still not found any books, but there hasn’t been so much as a single letter printed on anything at all. Printing aside, I can’t even find a single piece of paper!

“What the heck is... this...”

Blinding pain blasts through my head, as if my fever had come roaring back. My heart pounds in my chest, and I am deafened by the sudden ringing in my ears. I crumple to the floor, as if the strings holding me up were suddenly cut. My eyes are so hot.

Dying, crushed by books, had been my dream; being reincarnated, well, that’s okay too. But how am I supposed to live like this? What am I to live for? I hadn’t even thought that I could be reborn into a world without books. Why was I even born?!

Tears run down my face as I struggle to find a reason to keep living.

“Maine!! What are you doing up?! You shouldn’t have gotten out of bed without your shoes!” shouts Tory, as she walks into the kitchen to find me crumpled on the ground.

“…Tory… there’s no *'books’*…”

Even though I want to read so badly, there’s no books. I have no idea why, or even how, I’m going to keep living on.

“What’s wrong? Are you hurt?” asks Tory, concerned, as I lay there with tears constantly streaming from my eyes. There’s no way for me to explain. She can’t even see that not having books is a problem, how could she understand my feelings?

I want a book.

I want to *read*.

Hey, is there even anyone out there who would understand?

Where can I find a book?

Please, someone tell me.

•

004Town Exploration

Yesterday, I cried, and cried, and cried. When my parents called me for dinner, and even when they got mad at me for getting their bedding so dirty, the only reaction I could muster was more weeping. This morning, my eyes are hot and puffy from crying too much, and my head is pounding. However, my fever has gone away completely, and my body no longer feels sluggish and heavy. All that crying seems to have cleared away my foul mood as well.

After breakfast with my family, my mother fussed over my puffy face.

"Ah, your fever's gone."

With hands still cold from washing up, she feels my forehead, then rubs at the corners of my eyes. The coolness of her touch feels amazing.

"Say, Maine," says my mother, "now that you're well, would you like to help with the shopping today?"
"Huh? Mommy, what about work? My fever's gone now, so is it okay for you to not go to work?"

Didn't she say something earlier, like… "Work at the dyer's shop is unbelievably busy right now, so even though Maine has a fever, I can't take any time off"? She's a working woman! Is this okay?

She looks at me, with my head cocked curiously to one side, then looks down sadly.

"Tory has been taking care of almost all of your nursing, and I thought it was such a shame that I wasn't letting her go outside even a little… but yesterday, you were crying and crying, and Tory got so concerned. She said that she thought you might have started crying because you were so lonely, so she went around and begged our neighbors to help me take some time off."

At those words, my breath caught in my throat. I, a woman with the mental maturity of a twenty-two-year-old, spent an entire day crying, without even bothering to think of what anyone around me would think. I'm so ashamed that I want to go dig a hole and bury myself in it. Now that I've finally calmed down, what I did seems so unbelievably embarrassing.

"I'm… I'm… sorry…" I stammer.
"You don't need to apologize, Maine. Being sick makes everyone feel a little helpless."

My mother gently strokes my head to comfort me. Her gentleness only makes my feelings of guilt crash down on me even harder.

I'm so sorry. I was crying out of despair from realizing that there were no books, not at all because I was lonely because you were gone. Going looking for books as soon as Tory left the house… I don't know what I was thinking. I'm truly, truly sorry.

"Tory's going with everyone to the forest nearby," says my mother, "but I don't want you to

push yourself when you've only just gotten better. How about coming with me and doing some shopping?"
"Yeah!" I reply.
"Oh! You cheered up quickly."

My mother smiles happily at me, probably thinking that I'm overjoyed to spend some time with her.

I grin back at her. "It's gonna be fun!"

My mother looks so happy, so I'm in no hurry to tell her this, but the real reason for my mood swing was the realization that if I went outside, I might be able to get something to read. If I come along to go shopping, I might even be able to get my mother to buy me a book! It doesn't have to be a really thick one. For now, all I want is something that will help me learn the writing system. A workbook or something like that, aimed at kids, would be perfect. Maybe even just a chart with all of the letters on it!

I'm positive that if I smile cutely and say something like, "I won't get lonely if I have a book! I'll be a good girl and stay inside and help with the chores," then my mother will eventually cave to the begging of her adorable, frail little girl and buy me a picture book. Eh heh heh. This is going to be fun indeed.

"Mom, I'm heading out," says Tory, peeking into the bedroom with a huge smile on her face. Since our mother has the day off today, Tory, who would ordinarily be stuck watching me, has the day off as well.

"Alright, go meet up with everyone. Take care out there!" says our mother.
"Yes, Mom!"

Tory slings a big wicker basket over her back like a backpack, then takes off with a spring in her step. She's acting like she's going to go play with her friends, but in reality this is yet another chore. She's gathering firewood! While she's at it, she'll also be looking out for nuts, berries, and mushrooms to bring back with her. Whether our next few meals will be tasty or bland depends entirely on Tory.

You can do it, Tory! Spice up my life!

Children in this world seem to be put to work helping out with the chores very early in this world. It seems like there aren't any schools in this world, in addition to everything else that's missing. At the very least, I didn't see anything that looked like a school at all when I was digging through my memories. Tory's starting to grow up a little bit, so it looks like she's starting to work as an apprentice.

If I can, I'd like to do my apprenticeship under a librarian, or maybe even at a bookstore. Today will be a perfect day for me to gather some information while we're out and about. I'll figure out where the bookstore is, then make friends with the shopkeeper, and eventually become their apprentice. Hey, it's okay to be impressed by the cunning of this little girl, heh heh.

“Now then, Maine, shall we head out as well?”

This will be my first time leaving this building since I became Maine! The first time I’ve worn clothing that wasn’t just pajamas, too. These clothes are worn-out hand-me-downs as well, but they’re a little thicker, and I’ve been bundled up in countless layers. I’m so fluffy that it’s hard to move! It would seem that it’s cold outside.

I reach up to take my mother’s hand, and follow her, for the first time, outside.

Cold!
Cramped!!
Stinky!!!

The buildings are all made of stone, and it feels like their walls are sucking what little heat there is out of the air. Despite all of the clothes that I’m bundled in, the frigid air seeps through immediately, chilling me to the bone.

I’d give anything for some Heat-Tech, or some fleece, or even one of those chemical warmer things. While I’m wishing, I want a face mask, too! Something to block this stench and stop me from getting sick again.

Immediately outside the house is a stairway. A stairway so steep and narrow that I, stuck with the athletic ability of a three-year-old, am terrified of taking even the first step. My mother pulls on my hand, and we go down, with the warped boards creaking beneath our feet as we turn and turn and turn. After about two stories, though, the wooden stairs are replaced by sturdy, well-maintained stone.

This is the same building… why’s there such a difference?

My face may be screwed up against the cold and stench, but I’m finally outside. By my estimation, I think our house is on the fifth floor of this seven-story building. Honestly, with my tiny body, weak constitution, and general lack of strength, even just going outside is heavy labor by itself. I guess it’s only natural that most of Maine’s memories are of being indoors.

“Haaahh, haaahhhh… Mommy, I can’t… breathe… Slow down!”

We’ve only just started, and already I’m completely out of breath. I’m so weak that I have no idea if I’ll even be able to drag myself to our destination without collapsing in the street.

“We’ve only just left the house! Are you okay?”
“Yeah. I’m okay. Let’s go.”

At the very least, I want to figure out where the bookstore is. As I take some time to catch my breath, I take a look around my surroundings. Right outside our apartment building is something like a small plaza, centered on a public water well. The area immediately around the well has been paved with stone, and it’s full of old ladies chatting while they scrub away at their laundry. This must be the place where Tory goes to do the dishes, and where that big

water jug gets filled up every morning.

"Mommy, did you do the laundry?" I ask.
"I did! It's all done already."

These clothes still look a little dirty, but they've apparently been washed. Perhaps the detergent here isn't very good… I'm going to have to think about making some soap, too.

The plaza is surrounded on all sides by other tall apartment buildings, with a single road leading out to the rest of the town. We make our way along that narrow street, turn the corner, and find ourselves in an enormous main avenue.

Whoa, the streets of a foreign country…

The unfamiliar townscape stretches out before me. Pack animals, vaguely like horses or donkeys, clop along the cobbled roads, passing the merchants' stalls that fill both sides of the streets.

"Mommy," I ask, "What store are we going to?"
"Hmm, Maine, what are you saying? We're going to the town market, you know? We don't usually go to the shops."

It seems like the neatly-kept shops set up in the first floor of these buildings are usually frequented by people who actually have money, and lowly commoners like us usually don't have any need to go there. Instead, the daily shopping seems to be done at the town's market.

…So, does that mean that the bookstore is going to be a shop in one of these buildings, then?

As I look around, searching for any sign of a bookstore, I catch sight of an impressively large building, which looks like a local landmark. It's simply built, but its off-white stone walls radiate majesty and draw the eye to it.

"Oh, a castle?" I ask, pointing at the building.
"That's the temple, you know? When you're seven, you'll be going there to get baptized."

Ah, a church. A church, hmm. I really dislike the obligations of religion. I'd really rather not get anywhere near there, if I can help it.

Thanks to my modern Japanese sensibilities, I want to keep my distance from religion. I'm not sure how acceptable that's going to be in this world, though, so I bite back my objections. Instead, I turn my attention to the walls I see beyond the temple.

"Mommy, what about those walls?"
"Those are castle ramparts," she says. "The lord of the land makes his home in there, as do the rest of the nobility. We don't really have much business there, though."
"Hmmm…"

I can't see anything besides tall, stone walls, so from here it looks less like a castle and more like a prison. Maybe they're built like that so that they're fortified against outside attack? For some reason, when I think of European-style castles, I imagine them to be really luxurious. Ah, although, I guess it does kind of look like a castle that also needed to be a fortress.

"So, what's that wall?"
"That's the outer wall. It protects this district from the outside world. If you keep going straight along this road, you'll find a gate going outside. Your dad's probably working there right now."
"…Daddy?"

From Maine's memories, I know that my father is some kind of soldier, but I didn't know he was a gate guard. More importantly, though, the lord's castle is built like a fortress and surrounded both by ramparts and the outer walls. Based on that, I wonder if I should be thinking of this place as a city? Judging by the size of the walls surrounding this district and the stampede of people that fills this street, this doesn't seem to be a fairly large district, but I'm comparing it to, say, Tokyo or Yokohama, and I don't know how valid that comparison really is.

Aaaaargh, the size of a bookstore depends on the size of the city, and I don't even have a basis for comparison! Is this district big? Is it small?! Please, tell me, O great teacher!

"Maine, let's get going," says my mother. "If we don't get to the market soon, all the good things will be gone!"
I nod. "Okay."

As we walk, I keep my eyes peeled, constantly on the lookout for any sign of a bookstore. Strangely enough, I notice that the signs advertising the shops that line the streets are all illustrated. There's wooden signs with images painted on them, and metal signs with graphics engraved or beaten into them, but I have yet to see a single thing that looks like a written word. These signs are all designed so that even someone like me, who can't read at all, can understand them easily, which has made searching for a bookstore really easy, but… I suddenly have a terrifying thought.

Huh? Is there anything written down here at all? Not just in our house, but in this entire district? Maybe the literacy rate is low? …Maybe, writing hasn't even been invented yet?!

The color drains from my face as I realize the ramifications of this idea. I'd never even bothered to think that writing itself might not exist. If the written word hasn't been discovered, after all, books just don't exist.

"Maine, there's lots of people out here. Don't fall behind!" says my mother, chidingly.
"…Yeah," I say in a small voice.

I'm barely conscious of the movement of my feet as I struggle to hold back my terror, so we arrive at the market before I know it. The chattering of a crowd unexpectedly assaults my ears, and I lift my head to see a bustling square, packed with carts, stalls, and people milling

about. It kind of reminds me of the crowds you'd see at festivals back in Japan, and for a second I feel strangely nostalgic.

Suddenly, I spot something at a nearby fruit stand that I had given up all hope of seeing. My eyes go wide and I start grinning uncontrollably, and I tug on my mother's skirt to get her attention.

"Mommy, look! There's something *'written'* there!!"

Wooden signs have been fixed to each basket of merchandise, and written upon them are some sort of glyphs. I can't read them, so I don't know if they're numbers or letters, but one thing's for sure: writing does indeed exist here. Just from seeing this one thing, blood rushes to my face, and I'm keenly aware of how hungry I've been for *writing*.

"Oh, that's the price. That's there so that you know how much you'll need to pay if you buy it."
"But it's written!!" I exclaim.

My mother must be confused as to why I've suddenly become so energetic, but that doesn't matter right now. As we walk around, I have her read off every single number I can find, and I focus as hard as I can on matching the numbers to the symbols.

All right, all right! Come on, my synapses!!

"So, is this one thirty lions?" I ask.

After a while of having numbers read to me, I cut in and read one out loud on my own, then look up at my mother for her reaction. It looks like I'm right: my mother is looking down at me, blinking in astonishment.

"That's amazing, Maine, you picked that up so quickly!"
"Heh heh…"

There are ten numerals, so it looks like the counting system is in base 10. I'm really glad it's not in base 2, or base 60, or anything else like that. Now that I know what symbols are attached to which numbers, performing calculations should be a piece of cake.

Ah, could it be, have I tripped the Genius flag? Although, that *is* the kind of flag that says I'll be a prodigy at ten, merely talented at fifteen, and then just ordinary after I hit twenty…

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005Books: Impossible to acquire.

"Now then, last on the list is meat. We're going to get a lot of it, and then we're going to need to salt it, or maybe smoke it…"

My mother, finished with buying our fruits and vegetables, heads towards the center of the market. There, it seems like the meat sellers are lined up against the outer wall.

"Why are we buying so much?" I ask.
"We have to prepare for winter, you know?" replies my mother. "Around this time of year, the farmers all have to bring their livestock in for the year. Anything that won't make it through the winter gets butchered, so this time of the year is when the most meat is sold. The animals have also been eating a lot to prepare for winter, so their meat is very fatty and delicious."
"…Umm, in the winter, does the market go away too?"
"Of course it does, you know? There aren't very many vegetables gathered during the winter, so the market isn't open very often."

Now that I think about it, it's obvious, but the thought hadn't occurred to me at all. In Japan, before greenhouse cultivation became commonplace, vegetables were sold seasonally, and before distribution methods were developed, they were all grown locally. You can keep food fresh for long periods of time with freezers or refrigerators, but before those things existed, you needed to actually preserve the food in your house.

"…I've never actually prepared for winter," I mumble.
"Did you say something?" asks my mother.
"Nuh-uh."

Preserving food at home, huh… Where in that tiny apartment are we going to preserve anything? That storage room isn't nearly big enough, right? Man, I'm glad that I'm a such a little girl; I'm so small that I'd only get in the way if I tried to help, so I'm not going to be scolded when I don't.

"…Erk, it stinks!"
"That's the smell of meat!"

The stench grows unbearable as we approach the butchers. I pinch my nose to stop the smell, but my mother keeps walking forward, looking like this was nothing out of the ordinary.

Meat's *supposed* to smell like this? Ughhh, I've got a bad feeling about this…

Even though my nose is plugged, the air is so foul that the very taste of it makes my eyes water as I finally arrive at the row of butchers' shops. On the counters, aside from the bacon and ham I expected, legs of meat are lined up, still attached to the feet and recognizable as animal parts. Inside the shop, dead animals, drained of blood, swing from the rafters. Bunnies and birds line the shelves, their eyes wide open and their tongues lolling out of their

mouths.

"Gyaaaaaaah!!" I scream.
"What's wrong, Maine?!"

To be honest, for someone like me, who's only ever seen raw meat after it's already been completely disassembled, cut up into little pieces, and put in packs, the butchers' shops of this world are a little too over-stimulating. All the hairs on my body stand on end, tears stream down my face, and I screw my eyes shut to block out the awful sight. The single glimpse I caught, though, remains fixated with my mind, and won't go away no matter how much I want to forget it.

"Maine? Maine?!"

My mother shakes me side to side. At that instant, a pig screams as its dissection begins, and my eyes snap open. Smiling people have gathered around me, watching and waiting eagerly as an animal is murdered right in front of them.

Why do you look like this is fun, people? Why are you smiling so much?! Stop it! Stop it stop it! This is terrifying!!

"Urkh……"

The pig squeals out one final time as the knife rams home. My own small cry joins it, and I faint on the spot.

Something's being poured into my mouth. It's a harsh, astringent, *extremely* stimulating liquid that smells like strong alcohol. Since I'm not quite awake enough to drink it properly, it flows straight down my windpipe. I leap to my feet, my eyes wide open, and start an enormous coughing fit.

"Cough! Cough! Cough!"

Is this actual alcohol?! What unbelievable idiot would dare force such a powerful spirit down the throat of such a helpless and innocent young child?! What would you do if I'd gotten alcohol poisoning?!

My mother is next to me, holding a bottle of alcohol.

"Maine, are you awake? Ahh, that's a relief, I'm so glad that I could wake you up."
"*Cough!* …Mommy?!"

With a huge sigh of relief, my mother hugs me tightly. I might not be very good at putting things into words at the moment, but I can speak my mind now, right?

Don't shove such a strong alcohol down the throat of a small child!! And especially do not do so to a child who not only has a weak constitution, but has also just finally recovered

from a fever so high that you thought she would die!! Are you trying to kill me?! Are you an idiot?! Do you want me to die?!

"Alright then, Maine. Now that you're awake, let's go back and get that meat."
"What?!"

A shudder ripples through me. That horrifying spectacle has already been seared into my memory. It flashes before my eyes like a daydream, and just the memory of it gives me goosebumps. I do not want to go back there. This woman, she used strong alcohol to revive a young girl, and now she's taking the girl who literally just fainted at the sight of the butcher and dragging her *back* to the butcher… could it be that she's a brute?

"…Ummmm, I still don't feel good," I say. "I'm gonna stay here. Mommy, go ahead!"
"Eh? But…"

I give my hesitant mother a sidelong glance, then spin in place to face the lady running the shop. I need to secure my position before she drags me away.

"Excuse me, but could you let me wait here?" I say to the shopkeep. "I'm not going to be any trouble, I'll just sit right here."
"Oh, you're very level-headed for such a little girl," she replies, with a dry, crackling laugh. "Your mother did just buy some liquor, so I'll let you stay for a bit. It would be awful if I kicked out a little girl who wasn't feeling well and she had another accident, right? Take care of your shopping, ma'am, I'll watch her for you."

It seems that this woman is the proprietor of this liquor stall, from where my mother just bought the alcohol she used to revive me. The old man from the general store next door seems to have taken pity on me as well, and he waves me over.

"Come and wait over here, missy, that way nobody'll come by and try to snatch ya…"

He motions me to a spot behind and between the two stalls and helps me sit down. It feels like the liquor that was poured down my throat is churning around inside me. Right now, moving around too much would be dangerous. If, for instance, I were to collapse from acute alcohol poisoning, nobody else would be able to figure out why.

While sitting down, I idly look over the contents of the two shops. The liquor stand seems to have received a new shipment of cider, just in time for its most popular season, and customers come one right after the other to buy little casks of it. The general store, on the other hand, doesn't have nearly as many customers.

Just what does a general store sell in this world?

I look over the various goods that are lined up for sale, but for the most part I have no idea what I'm looking at.

"Mister, what's thiiis?" I ask, pointing at one of the random things on a nearby shelf.
"Oh, have you not used one of these before, little missy? This is what you use when you're

weavin' cloth. Oh, and this one's used for huntin'."

Since he doesn't have any customers at the moment, the old man gladly explains what each thing does as I point at it in succession. There's so much stuff here that's used in daily life around here that I just don't know anything about. I dig through Maine's memories, but she either wasn't very interested in these things or she never really learned about them.

As I look around the items jumbled on the shelves in admiration, I notice something in the far corner. It may be just a single volume, but I definitely see the spine of some massive, bulky tome. It's the kind of binding that I'd usually only see behind a glass case in a library, with a leather cover and fine gold caps on each of the corners. It's so huge that I don't think I'd be able to even hold it.

…That's a book! That, don't tell me, that's a book, right?!

The instant I laid eyes on the spine of that book, color blasted back into my world. The heavy clouds that had weighed down on my mind were instantly driven away, and my very spirit was brightened in a moment.

"M… mister!! What's this?! What do you call this?!"
"Ahh, that's a book!"

Yessss! I finally found one! Books, they exist! It might just only be one, but they exist!

This book has scoured away my lingering depression from having been reborn into a world without any books. I tremble with emotion as I gaze longingly at its spine. It is absolutely too heavy for me to move, so it would merely be an ornament. From the looks of it, there's no way that it isn't prohibitively expensive, and there's no way that I'll be able to get my mother to buy it for me, no matter how much I pester her about it. However, if books like this exist, then there must be smaller, easier-to-carry books out there as well. I spin around to face the old man, eyes wide with raw hunger.

"Hey, mister, where can I find a store that sells books?"
"A store for books? There's no store like that." He gives me a what-the-hell-is-this-kid-talking-about look, and my excitement drops down a couple of notches. There's books, so why are there no bookstores?
"…Huh? Why? You're selling one here."
"Books are only made when people transcribe them from the author's original work, so they're far too rare and valuable to just sell on the market. Even this one here ain't actually for sale, it's bein' held as collateral for someone in the aristocracy. Well, if he don't come back soon, I guess I'll have to sell it, but the buyer'll probably be another aristocrat."

Aristocrats!! If I were actually following the reborn-into-a-parallel-universe trope, I would have been born into the nobility! I would be able to read! Why am I just a commoner?!

Thoughts of slaughtering the aristocracy flash through my mind. They're surrounded by books from the minute they're born. What have they done to deserve such a blessing?

“Little missy, is this the first book you’ve ever seen?”

I tear my eyes away from the book, nodding vigorously in reply to the old man’s question. Yes, this is the first book I’ve ever seen in this world. On top of that, they’re not usually for sale, and there’s no bookstores, and there’s a very good chance that such a chance encounter may never ever happen again. …and, so!!

“M… mister!! Please, hear me out!”

With my fists clasped tightly together, I stand straight up, then fall to my knees in front of the shopkeeper. “What’s all this now?” he says, wide-eyed in surprise as I kneel before him.

This isn’t just an idle wish. What I need to demonstrate to this man is that this is the foundation at the heart of my foundation, and the most sincere demonstration in the world is begging on your hands and knees. I bow my head sharply, and do my best to explain my feelings as clearly and frankly as I can.

“It may be obvious that I cannot buy that book, but, at least, let me touch it! Let me rub my face against it! At the very least, let me sniff it, let me breathe in the scent of its ink! Just that would be enough!!”

…The silence that filled the air after my heartfelt request was almost to painful to bear, yet the shopkeeper gave no reply. Timidly, I raise my head to look up at him. For some reason, he looks like he’s swallowed a bug, or maybe like he’s spotted some unbelievably disgusting pervert. Shock and disgust play across his face as he looks down at me.

Huh? Did my sincerity fail to shine through?

“I… don’t know if I’m really understandin’ what you mean, but… I think it might be dangerous for me to let you touch that.”
“B… but?!”

I start to reiterate my passionate request, but my time is apparently up.

“Maine, I’m done!” says my mother. “Let’s head home.”
“Mommy…”

Tears start falling from my eyes as soon as I hear her voice. The book’s right there, but I’ll never touch it. I’ll never smell it.

“What’s wrong, Maine?” she asks me, concerned. A dangerous look flashes across her face, and she spins around to face the shopkeeper. “What did you do to her?!”
I jump between them and shake my head vigorously. “N… nothing! Nothing!” If I don’t clear this misunderstanding up immediately, then I’d be just heaping more problems on the kind old man who let me take shelter in his shop and taught me about books. That’s no way to return a favor.

“I don’t feel too good. Mommy, what did you make me drink? I’ve been feeling really funny

since I woke up."
"……Ahhh, maybe the liquor I used to wake you up was a little too effective. Let's get you home, get you some water, and get you a nice quiet place to rest. You'll be all right."

My mother nods her head in understanding, but it doesn't look like she's thinking at all about whether or not it was a bad idea to have given alcohol to a child in the first place. She takes my hand, and with a tug starts pulling me back towards home. I look behind me as I walk away, and smile my biggest smile at the two shopkeepers.

"Thanks for letting me sit down!"

I didn't bow, like I'm accustomed to, but not because I'm emotionally compromised. Rather, I don't remember actually seeing anyone bowing their heads, so I don't think that's the custom here. For now, I'll just keep smiling. A great smile is indispensable when dealing with other people, and from the way they're smiling and waving back, it looks like my guess was correct.

"Maine, are you still feeling bad?" asks my mother.
"…Yeah."

We don't say very much as we trudge home, hand in hand. I look at the shops along our route home, and, of course, there aren't any bookstores. My goal for today of coercing my mother into getting me a children's book and maybe learning a few letters has ended in complete failure. Even though this city is home to the lord of the land, even though we are surrounded by such spectacular walls, there's no bookstore here. If books truly aren't for sale, even here, then there might not be a bookstore anywhere in the world.

I'm in despair. I had never thought that God could be so cruel as to force me, Urano Motosu, the book enthusiast who could go a day or two without eating as long as she had a book to read, to live a life bereft of books.

At least, why wasn't I born a noblewoman… *Sniff!* To reincarnate me as a peasant… God… what did I do to earn this hatred?

Even if I say that I want my parents to become nobility so that they can buy me books, those are just childish fantasies. I'd never say that I don't want to have been born into this family. Really, though, I want to be an aristocrat. If I can't be an aristocrat, I at least want enough money to be able to buy all the books out of a disgraced aristocrat's estate.

I may be stuck in this awful environment, but I know for a fact that no matter how hard I cry, it's not going to get me a book. If there aren't any bookstores, I can't buy a book.

So, how am I going to get one?
I'm just going to have to make them myself, aren't I?

Really, what I truly want are books from this world, but that's an unreasonable luxury. In order to fulfill my most urgent desires, I'm going to have to put off learning how to read the language here. Instead, I'll make books in Japanese, which I already know.

I haven’t yet figured out how I’m going to do all that, but that doesn’t matter right now. I will definitely acquire a book!

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006Interlude: My sister's gotten weird.

My name's Tory. I'm six years old. I have a little sister, Maine. She's five.

Maine has straight, dark blue hair, like the color of the night sky, and golden eyes that shine like the moon. I think she's really adorable, but I am her older sister.

She's always really sick and always has a fever, so she doesn't eat much, so she hasn't grown very much. She also can't go outside very much, so her skin is pale white. She's really adorable, but I can't play with her very much, which is a little disappointing. The other kids get to play with their brothers and sisters, and I get kinda jealous.

The other day, Maine had a really bad fever. It was so bad that everyone in the family was worried, wondering if she would live or die. For three days, she didn't eat anything, and she even got so weak that she couldn't drink any water.

The fever might have made her a little strange in the head.

When she was sick, she started using words I didn't really understand and getting really mad all of a sudden. She always used to do what she was told, but when I went to go wash the dishes, she snuck out of bed and I found her crying and I don't know why. She spent the whole day crying…

I though that maybe Maine was still suffering because of her fever, but when her fever went down, she got even weirder.

Seriously, she started saying that her body felt gross and that she wanted to wipe herself off. When we boil water to cook our food, she asks if she could have some warm water for a bath. Every day!

Every day, she wets a cloth and wipes her body off. "Help me with the parts I can't reach," she says, so I help her out. On the first day, the bath water got really dirty, but by the third day, it was still pretty clean.

"You're not really dirty, so isn't taking a bath kind of a waste?" I asked, but she just said, "It's not a waste, I am dirty!"

Every day, she obsesses over making sure she washes herself off. Before I knew it, one of the corners of the bedroom had turned into her bathing space.

Then, for some reason, she decided that I should start washing myself as well when I was helping her. "Sure, why not," I said, and started scrubbing my face. "You go outside a lot," she said, "so you get dirtier than me."

When I washed myself off, the water that Maine had left clean got really dirty and muddy. When I stared at all of the dirt that had been on me, I started feeling a little bit gross. Maine, though, was beaming. "If there's two of us, it's not a waste, right?" she said.

What will it take to make her see that it really is a waste? I have to bring all of that water up from the well, and it's really hard! Doesn't she know that?

After that, she suddenly started wearing her hair up. Her hair is really straight, so no matter how tightly we tie it back, it unties itself and comes down immediately, so we haven't really been tying it back. After trying and failing to tie it back several times, Maine started to sulk. Suddenly, she got up and started rummaging around in our toy basket. She pulled out a doll that Dad had whittled out of wood and Mom had made clothes for… my most precious possession!

"Tory, can I break this off?" she asked.
"That's my doll's leg! Maine, that's awful!!"

It was terrifying that my little sister could so calmly ask to break off my doll's leg. It was too cruel. When I got mad, she hung her head and mumbled "sorry". Sighing, she ran her fingers through her hair, pushing her bangs back. Seeing a five-year-old do something so strangely sensual made my breath stop for a moment.

"Tory, if I wanted a stick like this, what should I do?"

What Maine really wanted wasn't my doll's leg, it was a wooden rod. So, I got a stick from the kindling pile. Instead of letting her break my doll, I used a knife to whittle the stick down into a little rod. She had a lot of requests, like "make this part a little skinnier" or "could you round the ends off to make them less sharp", but eventually she was satisfied.

"Thanks, Tory!"

With a big smile, Maine took the rod from me, then suddenly jammed it through her own head.

"Maine?!" I yelled, startled.

Maine started to turn the rod, which she had actually stuck through her hair, winding her hair tightly around it. Somehow, she put all of her hair up, with just that one little rod. I was surprised how firmly it stayed in place. It was like the magic the nobility uses! However, her hairstyle looked very adult.

"Maine," I say, "you can't put all of your hair up! Only grown-ups do that."
"…Oh, really?"

With wide eyes, like she really didn't know, she reached up and pulled the rod out of her hair. Immediately, her hair came undone and fell around her shoulders. Then, she grabs just the top part of her hair, and wraps it up like she did before.

"Is this okay?" she asks.
"I think so, yeah!"

After that, Maine started to always wear her hair up like that. She looks like she has a stick

through her head if you look at her from the front, but she seems happy with it.

A little while later, Mom was able to take a day off from work, and I was finally able to go out into the forest with everyone else. I gathered a lot of firewood, and was also able to find a lot of forest mushrooms, as well as some herbs that we can use to season the meat. We need to be preparing for the winter, so all of the kids are working hard to gather things.

"I'm home," I say, as I walk through the door. "Welcome back, Tory," replies Mom.

"What did you get? Show me, show me!" says Maine, digging around in my basket like this was a rare and unusual thing. I did this just the other day, but Maine… yeah, when I think about it, Maine's being weird lately.

"Aha, this! Can I have this!"

With gleaming eyes, she pulls a melia fruit out of my basket. Maine doesn't ask for things very often, so I thought it would be okay to give her two of them.

"Thanks, Tory!" she says, beaming like an angel. She runs off into the storage room, then comes back out, looking like everything in the world is absolutely perfect.

"Maine, why are y…"

As soon as I started to speak, Maine suddenly swung a hammer and, with a thud, smashed the melia. It splits apart with a squish, and the juice inside splatters all over my face.

"……"
"……"

When you smash it with a hammer, of *course* the juices are going to splatter everywhere, you know? Surely you know that without having to think about it, right?

"So, Maine. What are you doing?" I ask, trying to put on a smile as I wipe the splattered juice from my face. With a weird sort of "whee!" noise, she jumps up with a start.

"…Ummmm, so, yeah. I wanted some oil," she says, with a oh-no-now-I've-done-it sort of facial expression. She looks up at me, as if asking for help. This is definitely the face of a girl that absolutely didn't realize that smashing something with a hammer would send pieces flying everywhere.

"If you wanted oil, you *know* there's better ways to make it, right?! What are you doing?!"
"Oh, I see…" she says, dejectedly.

Is she really okay? Does she really not remember back when we pressed vais oil together? Oh no, maybe she had a fever for too long and she's gone funny in the head! …I should ask Mom about this, shouldn't I?

Afterwards, when we were in the middle of cleaning up, Mom came back inside, carrying water from the well for our dinner. Of course, she got mad. This was all Maine's fault, but she got mad at both of us, because I wasn't a very good older sister. Right then, Maine didn't seem very adorable at all.

"Tory, Tory," she asked, "How do you make oil? Teach me?"

Since Mom was in such a huff, Maine stealthily made her way over to me to ask her question. Her sneaking was completely visible. Look, Mom's watching us right now.

"Mom," I ask, "Can I teach Maine?"
Mom sighs. "If we don't teach her, she's probably going to do something awful like this again." She points at the storage room. "Please, show her how to do it."

All of the tools we need to make oil are in the storage room, so I get a cloth and take Maine in there with me.

"…A wooden table like the one in the kitchen is just going to soak up the oils and juices, so we can't use that one. The metal table like here is better. First thing we need to do is spread a cloth out on the table. Then, we need to wrap the fruit in a cloth like this so that the pieces don't fly everywhere."

Melia fruit are edible, so we usually get the oil out of the seeds after we've finished eating. Maine, however, was very insistent that there's oil in the fruit, too.

She brought the hammer down with glee, over and over, but her aim wasn't very good, she wasn't very strong, and her posture was all wrong. She smashed up the fruit pretty well, but she wasn't able to smash any of the seeds. To make things worse, when we were done smashing up the seeds, we would need to wring the cloth out, and Maine doesn't have nearly enough strength to do that.

"Maine, that's not working. You're not smashing the seeds, you know?"
"Ooh… …Toooryyyyy…"

She looked up at me with such a pitiful expression that I decided to help out. I took the hammer from her, but it was so sticky and slippery with juice already that it nearly slipped from my hands. Sighing, I wiped off the handle, and gripped it tightly.

"This is how we do it…"

If Dad were doing this, he wouldn't be using a hammer. He'd get something really heavy to put on top of it and press the oil out of it without doing a whole lot of work. Boys are expected to do manual labor as they grow up, so they can lift heavy weights like that. I can't, though, so I had to smash those seeds one by one with a hammer.

"And now, we wring out the cloth…"
"Whoa! Tory, you're amazing!"

The oil drips into a small dish as I wring out the cloth. As Maine watches, the look of pure joy on her face is extremely adorable. My arms, however, extremely hurt.

"Thanks, Tory!" she says.
"Hey, don't run off, help me clean up!"

Maine seemed confused, like she didn't quite know what to do to help, so I helped show her how to clean up all of the tools we used.

Maine has a weak constitution and is much shorter than other kids her age, so it's easy to forget that she's already five. When she turns seven, she'll be baptized at the temple, and she'll have to find someplace to start an apprenticeship.

Not only that, but next year I'm going to be turning seven. I'm going to start my apprenticeship, so Maine's going to have to be able to do half of the housework by then. She doesn't even know where the tools go or how to clean them right now, so I don't know if she's going to be okay.

We're going to keep an eye on her health, but we have to gradually start making her help out with the housework. Otherwise, Maine as she is right now isn't really going to be able to find work. Mom's going to have to stop pampering her, and I, her big sister, am going to have to teach her everything she needs to know.

"Tory," said Maine, "Can I have some herbs too?"
"Just a little?"
"Yeah!"

With a serious face, Maine went through the herbs she took from my basket, sniffing them each and adding a few of them to her oil. She's probably trying to change the scent of it, but some of the herbs she's using are used to keep bugs away, and they'll make it too smelly to eat.

Whoa… shouldn't I get this into our food before that finishes happening?

I immediately started to try to add the melia oil to the pot, but Maine cut me off with a frantic expression.

"Tory, no! What are you doing?!"
"If we don't eat this soon," I said, "we won't be able to use it at all! These herbs are going to change the flavor so much that we're not going to be able to eat it, you know?"
"No, don't eat it!"

No matter what I said, Maine just kept shaking her head and trying to hide the bowl the oil was in. Eventually, Mom got bothered enough that she looked over at what we were doing, and she started getting angry as well.

"Maine!" she yelled. "Those are things that Tory went and gathered! Don't be selfish!"
"I'm not selfish! Tory gave these to me!"

No matter how mad Mom got, Maine still wouldn't listen. When even the two of us couldn't make her change her mind, we finally gave up, and Maine went off to wash herself off as usual.

Then, she suddenly dumped about half of the oil into her bath water and started mixing it up! Now we really couldn't eat it. And I'd spent so much trouble finding those, too!

"Maine! What are you doing!" "Eh? I'm washing, you know?"

I couldn't understand what Maine was doing, even when she tried to tell me. Lately, this has been happening more and more. As I watched, dumbfounded, Maine soaked her hair in the bucket and started to wash it. She splashed the part soaking in the water around, then started repeatedly scrubbing at the top of her head. When she seemed satisfied, she tightly wrung out all of the excess water out of her hair, then used a cloth to start drying it. When she was finished, she combed it out straight.

Her deep blue hair was suddenly so much smoother and silkier that it was positively radiant.

"…What… is this?" I ask.
"Ummm, a *"simple 2-in-1 shampoo"*."[1]
"Huh?"
"Do you want to use it to, Tory? If both of us use it, it won't be a waste!"

After seeing how beautiful Maine had suddenly become, I kind of wanted to try it. I wanted to try being that beautiful.

However, I had been so mad at her just a little while ago that I felt awkward using it. Though, when Maine reminded me that I was the one who'd found the melia and pressed it for oil, the awkwardness blew away.

When you think about it like that, didn't I do literally all of the preparation work?

Hesitantly, I undid my braid, then lowered my hair into the bucket and washed it like Maine had done. Maine helped too, and her tiny hands helped to wash the parts I missed.

"I think it's good now?"

After drying it a bunch and combing it out, my hair was as glossy as Maine's. Although it had always been really poofy and frizzy and impossible to comb out, now it was gentle and wavy. It's almost like magic.

"You're so beautiful!" says Maine. "Tory, you smell nice."

She seems pleased, for some reason, as she combs out my hair. I was delighted that I'd become so beautiful… but, how did Maine learn how to do this?

Maine really has gotten weird. If she gets weirder like this every time she has a fever… that's a terrifying thought.

…Although, when Mom freaked out when she saw us as we cleaned up Maine's bucket, I started wondering what Maine would get up to next. I might be looking forward to it, just a little.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Urano originally called this a "簡易ちゃんリンシャン", which is a reference to an older commercial for a 2-in-1 shampoo.

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007Neighborhood Boys

Since I don't have any books, I'll make some myself.

Ever since I decided on that particular course of action, my mood has improved drastically, and I've been way more forward-thinking. Trouble is, there isn't a single scrap of paper in this house. This is something I know from my earlier home explorations. So, I need to go and buy paper, but I have no idea where I'd find it. Trouble is, this town doesn't have any convenience stores, hardware stores, supermarkets, or stationery shops.

Well, where the heck do I go to buy paper? The old man at the general store said that you have to copy books by hand if you want them, so I think there might be blank books available for sale. Although, where the heck do I find those? Perhaps there's a store that deals exclusively in paper.

If I were in Japan, I'd be done in an instant. I'd write everything out on loose-leaf in a binder, or in a notebook, or on stapled-together printer paper. Here, though, there's no end to my problems.

There isn't any paper in the house, so I'm going to need to start searching for some if I want to have any chance of making a book. My mother went to work this morning, so right now at home there's just Tory and me. Of course, this means there's only one person around to interrogate.

"Tory," I ask, "Do you know where to buy *'paper'*?"
"Hm? What did you say?" she replies.
"*'Paper'*! Where do I go to… oh!"

Tory looks at me quizzically, her braided hair swinging as she tilts her head to one side. This is the face of someone who doesn't understand the Japanese word I just used.

Not good. I don't know how to say "paper" in this language. Argh! I really should have asked the old guy at the general store what it was called!

"…you wouldn't know, huh?"
"Sorry, Maine," says Tory, "I guess I don't. That's a funny word, though."

I hang my head with a dramatic jerk, and let out a deep sigh. The truth is, not knowing where to buy paper is just one of my problems. I also have no idea where to find pencils or pens. Based on what I've seen of this city, I doubt anything like a mechanical pencil or a ballpoint exists. Even fountain pens might be unlikely.

Well then, what should I use a writing implement? And, of course, where should I go to find it? And, above all, I'm certainly not able to go out, by myself, in order to buy all of these materials. This really is troublesome.

"Ah!" exclaims Tory, from the kitchen. "Dad forgot this!"

I make my way over to the kitchen, where Tory is holding a bundle.

Sure enough, this looks like the thing from this morning, where our father had suddenly said "I need that thing for work, can you get it out for me" and our mother had gotten mad and shot back "why didn't you ask me earlier", then she frantically tore apart the storage room looking for it. Thinking about how mad she would be if she were to find out that our father had then forgotten that thing sends shivers down my spine.

"Tory, Mommy's going to be mad, right?"
"You think so too, Maine?"

I don't know if it's this family or this world, but people here are very forthright about their emotions. When they laugh, it's with a booming voice and an idiotic grin, and when they're mad, they burn like a raging fire. In other words, my mother's explosive anger is *terrifying*.

"Tory, should we take this to Daddy?" I ask.
"…Ummm, well, leaving you alone is, uh…"

When she had stepped outside for just a moment to wash the dishes, I snuck out of the bedroom and then cried my eyes out. When I had gone out shopping with our mother, I fainted and collapsed in a heap. My family's estimation of me is probably scraping rock bottom, so Tory probably isn't going to let me out of her sight.

"If Daddy doesn't have this he'll be in trouble, right?"
"…Maine, are you able to walk all the way to the gates?"

Rather than leaving me alone, it looks like we're going to go out together. Thinking of the distance between here and the town market makes me a little bit uneasy, but my mother's wrath is far more terrifying. I clench my fist and put on my bravest face.

"I'll… I'll do it!" I say.
"Well, let's go, then."

Package in hand, we depart, bundled up in our countless layers of clothing. Although we may be wearing many layers, we are not at all fashionable in the slightest. This is entirely for protection from the cold.

By the way, my selection of clothing includes two pairs of underwear, two woolen one-piece dresses, one knitted woolen sweater, two pairs of knit pants that are kind of like long johns, and two pairs of socks, also knitted out of wool. I am wearing every single piece of it.

"Tory, isn't this too heavy to move in?" I had asked, while we were bundling up.
"If we don't wear it all, though, the wind's going to break in through the patches and seams, you know? You catch cold super easily too, so you definitely have to wear everything."

There had been no arguing with my mother when she made me do this, but I briefly entertained the notion that maybe I'd be able to push back against Tory. She, however, was adamant that I dress appropriately to keep myself healthy. I surrendered to her strong sense

of responsibility and put everything on. Thanks to that, it's very hard to move right now.

Tory is really fit, so even though she's bundled up just as tightly as I am, she's as nimble as she usually is. To make things worse, she's always going out to collect firewood with the other children and run errands for our mother, so she's used to walking around a lot. I, on the other hand, am neither strong nor fast. And I'm wearing a ton of clothing.

"Maine, are you alright?" "Haaah… haaah…" I pant, "If we go… a little slower… I'll be fine."

Just like last time, I'm out of breath after climbing down all those stairs. I walk at my own pace. If I push it too hard and collapse, I'm just going to burden Tory even more. It's important for me to start building her trust in me back up.

Even so, walking on cobblestones is haaaard…

They're extremely uneven, so if you aren't paying too much attention to where you step, your foot will get caught and you'll fall on your face. I hold onto Tory's hand, letting her do the navigating while I concentrate on putting my feet in the right place.

From a little ways away, a boy's voice rings out. "Oh hey, it's Tory! What are you up to?"

I raise my head. Three boys, wearing wooden backpacks and carrying bows, come running up to us. With red, blond, and pink hair, the trio is certainly eye-catchingly colorful.

Their clothing might have originally been dyed, but years of dirt and food stains have made them a mottled gray. They seem like hand-me-downs, covered in patches. It's not that different than what I'm wearing, so their standard of living is probably the same as ours.

"Ah, Ralph! And Lutz and Fey too!"

Since Tory seems so friendly with these three, it's likely that Maine has some sort of connection to them as well. I scrunch up my forehead in concentration, digging through Maine's memories.

Ah, yep, there it is. Oh, they're the neighborhood kids.

Ralph, same age as Tory. He's redheaded and is the strongest. The leader of the kids, gives off an atmosphere as if he's everyone's big brother.
Fey, also the same age as Tory. Pink-haired, with the kind of mischievous face you'd see on the worst kind of prankster. He and Maine never got very close, maybe because of the differences in their constitution, so she doesn't have very many memories of him.
Lutz, Ralph's younger brother and the same age as me. He tries to act like he's my older brother, but he comes across like a cute little boy that wants to grow up.

The three of them seem to be part of Tory's usual party when she heads off to the forest, and it seems like they sometimes brought Maine along with them. The memories of those few outings seem much clearer than Maine's other memories.

While my focus was turned inward as I dug through my memory, Tory had struck up a lively conversation with Ralph.

“My dad forgot something, so we’re going to the gates to bring it to him,” she says. “You guys going to the forest?”
“Yeah. Wanna go to the gate together?”
“Sure!”

When I see how her face lights up as she talks to Ralph, I realize how much trouble I’m putting her through every day. Of course heading off to the forest with your friends is way more fun than babysitting, isn’t it? I’m sorry for being such a drag of a little sister. Although, my fever *has* been down for a few days, so it should be okay for me to start going out again. Specifically, to go out and find a store that will sell me some paper.

When the other kids had just joined up with us, they’d started going at my speed, but Tory suddenly sped up. Since we’re holding hands, I’m pulled along with her. Quickly, my feet get tangled together.

“Whoaaaa!”
“Maine?!” Tory immediately stops moving, so I don’t fall flat on my face, but I do scrape my knee. “I’m so sorry! Are you okay?”
“…Yeah.”

My knee doesn’t hurt very much, but now that I’ve sat down, standing up seems so hard. I just want to rest a little. As I think about how oppressive this situation is, Lutz offers me his hand.

“…Hey, Maine. Want to ride on my pack?”

Lutz, you’re such a good kid!

According to Maine’s memories, Ralph and Fey are always acting like they’re better than Lutz, so even though he’s the same age as Maine, he tries to act like her older brother, especially because she’s so small and weak. Whenever she started getting too exhausted, he’d take her pack so she could keep going. What a gentleman!

On top of that, his blond hair is a color that I’m actually used to seeing, unlike pink or green, which is comforting.

“Maine, are you getting another fever? If it’s getting too hard, I can carry you.”

Lutz seems so happy. Seriously, he does! However, even though he’s bigger than me, we’re still the same age, so having him carry me on his back might be kind of bad…

As I worry about what I should do, Ralph sighs a little, then puts down his backpack.

“Lutz,” he says, “if you’re carrying her, it’ll take us forever to get to the forest. I’ll carry Maine. Lutz, you take my bow, Fey, you take my backpack.”

“Ralph…”

Lutz scowls resentfully at Ralph. He must feel like his good deed was just snatched away from him.

I grab his hand tightly. “You were the first to help me, Lutz,” I say, smiling broadly. “You’re so kind. Thanks! You made me happy.”

Being praised for noticing me seems to be enough for Lutz. He smiles shyly, and takes Ralph’s bow without complaint.

If you praise a child for being kind, they’ll keep that kindness with them as they grow up. I’m speaking, of course, from my adult perspective.

“Hey, come here,” says Ralph, beckoning.
“Okay! Thanks, Ralph,” I reply.

Ralph is just a little bit bigger than Tory. I lean my weight against his back. There’s no need here for the shyness of a little girl. No need at all. With me riding securely on his back, Ralph starts walking at a steady pace.

My field of view is about thirty to forty centimeters higher than it usually is, and the world looks so different from up here. Or, more precisely, I don’t have to keep my eyes on the ground to avoid tripping, so I can actually look around freely. On top of that, Ralph doesn’t have to slow down to match my usual pace, so the scenery is flowing by at a steady rate.

“Whoa, I’m so high!” I exclaim. “So fast, too!”
“Don’t get too excited, okay?” he says. “You’ll get sick again.”
“Yeah! I’ll be careful.”

Eh heh heh, being a frail little girl has its advantages~! Even better, boys who keep going to the forest to get firewood are pretty strong. He’s got way more muscle than you’d expect from a kid.

If I compare these people to my recollection of what Japanese elementary schoolers are like, there is a significant difference in physique. This might not be a fair comparison, though; not only is the lifestyle very different, but these people are of a different race.

Another thing I shouldn’t be comparing to Japan is the scenery. Thin streams of filth ooze out from the narrow alleys, and the pack mules that wander up and down the main street are walking through piles of their own shit…

It’s… it’s not like I’ve been specifically staring at the filth! This is just the kind of spectacle that you’d never see in Japan, so I was a little surprised, so of course my eyes were drawn to it!

Unlike when I had gone out to the town market, the streets are filled with people going to work, so I can’t see into any of the first-floor shops as we go past. The shops that deal only

in commodities have glass windows, but from here, all I can see are the signs hung above the doors. To make things worse, all of the buildings along the street are of similar color and design, so my eyes are, of course, drawn to anything that stands out in the slightest. It's not my fault!

"You okay, Ralph?" asks Tory, looking a little concerned. "Maine isn't too heavy?"

Ralph shifts me around slightly with a jolt, securing his grip. He turns his head away a little. "I said it was okay," he says, curtly. "Maine's really tiny, and she's light. If we let her walk, wouldn't it trouble you more?"

I can sympathize with the shy expression on Tory's troubled face, and I want to help her out. Aren't you supposed to be thanking her right now?

…Oh *ho!* Ralph's just a boy! Perhaps he's interested in Tory? He's trying to use me to get into her heart. I don't particularly mind, though. Alright, let's make this puppy love happen!

…Of course, this is just my particular delusion. The both of them are still very young, so they probably aren't able to really feel true love… but I have no books to keep me busy, so at least let me have my fantasies.

Then, Ralph suddenly says "Tory, you smell… nice," acting so smooth as he smells her hair. What the hell, kid, do you think you're the hero of a YA romance novel? Then, of course, Tory blushes shyly and says "Really? Thanks…"

I may not have very many bittersweet experiences under my own belt, even at 22, but Tory is so ridiculously sweet at six years old that it's only natural for me to have these sorts of thoughts, right?

I never used to pay it any mind when people told me that I'd never have any sort of male presence in my life if I just stayed in my dream world, reading my books and lost in my fantasies. It wasn't just my family telling me this; even Shuu from next door kept saying it. None of your business! Idiots. Idiots!

While I was distracted by my irritating memories of Japan, Ralph and Tory's puppy love has blossomed into a proper reverse harem, with Tory in the middle.

"Oh, yeah! It does smell good!"
"What? What?"

Fey and Lutz have also moved in on Tory, smelling her braided hair. They're all about the same age, so this is definitely a reverse harem.

"Whoa, your hair is super glossy!"
"What did you do to it?"

Eh heh heh. That's right, that's right!

Satisfied with the surprised reactions of the reverse harem's members, I nod approvingly from my vantage point on Ralph's back. I've keeping a potpourri of dried flowers in our clothing box, boiling water at dinner time so that Tory and I can give ourselves sponge baths, washing our hair with herb oils and carefully brushing it out, and, bit by bit, bringing up the level of hygiene in our house.

It looks like my efforts are finally starting to pay off!

Incidentally, Ralph and co. are a little bit on the smelly side. Everything around here stinks, so I've somewhat gotten used to it, but things that stink still stink. Although I'd never say it out loud, from my position on Ralph's back, I can definitely say that he stinks.

I really want to make everyone start washing with soap. The only soap kept at home is a foul-smelling animal-based soap that's used for cleaning and doing laundry. Nobody has any nice-smelling vegetable-based soaps to wash themselves with, which is terrible.

Aaaah, even just hand soap would be nice…

As I spaced out, lost in my own thoughts, Lutz suddenly tugs on my hair, sniffing it like he did to Tory's. "Maine, you smell good too! I can see your face really well with your hair up like that too, you look really cute."

He gazes innocently at me with his pale green eyes.

Not good! Lutz, your color scheme is too good! Blond hair and green eyes, that's the recipe for a really hot dude!

Noooooooo! My opponent is a child, why am I suddenly so shy?! I know he has zero intentions, but the framing of this scene is just too awkward! Please, stop! I should be old enough to know better, but I have no experience with these things! I can't cope!!

I'm the only one here who's trying to keep their heart from doing backflips. Everyone else is already talking about the things they're going to find in the forest or when they think the first snowfall of the season will come. Ignoring how I'm about to faint, Lutz is bragging about how much better he's gotten at shooting his bow lately. Unlike Tory, who's shyly thanking everyone for their help, I can barely say a word. My heart is pounding again.

For five and six year olds to do this stuff so calmly, is this normal?! What's with this world! What's a humble, shy, pure girl to do? Will my heart be stained by evil?

…Don't you dare ask who I was calling a pure girl!

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008Paper: Impossible to acquire.

As I cling to Ralph's back, my legs dangling, the gates of the outer wall come into view.

The outer wall was built to protect the town, so it's considerably taller than other buildings nearby. It's about two or three stories tall by Japanese standards, and it's quite thick. It has gates at each of the cardinal directions, at which it seems that several soldiers are stationed in order to check incoming travelers.

The gate ahead is the south gate, and I can see several soldiers standing there. One of them is probably my father. I can't tell which one is him, but it looks like Tory knows. She clutches the bundle close to her chest, and runs forward, waving her arm.

"Father!" she calls.
Our father looks surprised. "Tory, what's the matter?"
"You left something at the house!" says Tory, beaming as she hands over the bundle. "We came to bring it to you."

Tory, you're so kind. You're too kind! If it were me talking to my previous father, I wouldn't have said anything nearly so kind. My true feelings would probably have slipped out, something like "Mom would be pissed if she found out you'd left this at the house, and that would be a huge bother. Did you forget what happened this morning?"

"Ahh, I'm saved!" he says, reaching out to take the bundle with a sigh of relief. "…Hm? Did you leave Maine by herself?!"

Father scowls. It seems that he hadn't noticed anyone except for his beloved daughter Tory, so he had completely ignored Ralph's group and missed me, his other beloved daughter, clinging to Ralph's back. Tory shakes her head vigorously, and points over at Ralph.

"Nuh uh, she came too! Look, she's riding on Ralph's back."
"Huh? Oh! I see." He glances around, feeling a little embarrassed that he hadn't noticed us, then pats Ralph on the head. "Sorry you had to carry her all this way, Ralph."
"We were going to the forest, so it was on our way," says Ralph, looking a little bothered by how my father is ruffling his hair. He sets me down, then goes to collect the stuff that Fey and Lutz were holding for him.

"Thanks, Ralph," says my father. "Lutz and Fey, you too."

We see off Ralph and his friends as they head through the gate on their way to the forest, then Tory and I head to the gate's waiting room. The wall here is thick enough that you could probably put a three meter by four meter room[1] in it. This room isn't nearly that large, so it looks like there's both a waiting room and a room for the night watch in here. The waiting room is very simple, with a table, a few chairs, and a cabinet.

I look around excitedly, feeling like I'm visiting a foreign country for the first time. After a little while, one of my father's coworkers brings us some water.

“You two are such good kids, bringing your dad something he forgot.”

It took us about twenty minutes, going at Tory’s pace, to get from our home to the gate, so I’m incredibly grateful to finally get some water. I gulp back all of the water in the wooden cup I’ve been given, then let out a huge sigh.

“Ahhh, delicious! I’ve been revived!”
“Maine,” says Tory with a frown, “didn’t you barely walk at all?”

At those words, everyone starts laughing. I try to look upset, but I really can’t object since everyone saw Ralph carrying me in. I help myself to another cup of water as everyone laughs at me.

Another soldier enters the room. He grabs a wooden box, which seems to be some kind of toolbox, from the shelves, then immediately heads back out. Unintentionally, I frown a little at how hectic things seem to be.

“Daddy,” I ask, “Did something happen?”
“It’s probably just someone who needs special attention coming through the gates. Nothing to worry about.”

My father may be waving his hand dismissively while saying not to pay it any mind, but I can’t help but worry a little when I see a busy situation like that. Are things really okay?

I mean, this is a gate. The gatekeepers are riled up, you know? Isn’t this a danger flag?

In contrast to my worries, Tory is just sitting there, looking like there’s no danger at all, with her head tilted to one side. “What kind of person needs special attention?” she asks. “Have I seen them before?”

It looks like Tory can’t think of anyone who would rile up the guards like this, even though she travels through this gate fairly often. Our father rubs thoughtfully at the stubble on his chin for a moment before answering.

“Uhhh, perhaps its someone who looks like a bad person who committed a crime. Or, maybe, it’s an arriving aristocrat that we need to inform the lord about.”
“Oh…”

If he says that someone looks like a criminal, then it seems like they pass judgement just based on how someone looks. Although, if I think about how things work around here, it seems unlikely that they have any real way to transmit information around, so they probably have no choice but to stop and investigate every suspicious-looking individual.

“We’ll have them wait in another room while the higher-ups decide if it’s okay to let them into the city.”

Ahh, so that means that there must be several waiting rooms around the gate. I get it now. Surely, there must be significant differences between the rooms for the nobility and rooms

for criminals, from the size of them to the quality of the furniture. Life's unfair, no matter what world you're in.

While I contemplate these things, the young soldier returns, bringing back the wooden box as well as some sort of cylindrical, pipe-like item. There wasn't even a trace of any tension on his face, like you'd expect from an emergency situation. Looks like my father was right, this is no big deal.

The soldier, with cargo in his left hand, walks up to my father, raises his right fist, then thumps the left side of his chest twice. My father stands up, straightens himself, and returns the gesture. This is probably this world's salute.

"Otto, I'll leave the report to you," says my father, with a stern, commanding expression that I've never seen at home.

"Ohh," I murmur, appreciatively. I haven't seen him do anything but laze around, so this is really fresh. His expression is sharp, and he actually looks really cool.

"Count Lowenwalt wishes for the rampart gates to be opened, sir," says Otto.
"His seal?"
"Has been verified, sir."
"Right, he can pass."

Otto salutes once more, then sits down in the chair across from me. He sets the wooden box down on the table next to him, then uses both hands to spread the other thing out. It isn't as smooth as paper, and it has some sort of smell to it, but my eyes snap to it immediately.

Parchment?!

I don't know if it really is parchment, but it definitely is some kind of paper that has properties like it was made out of animal skin. I can't read anything it says, but there are words written there using the alphabet of this world. Before my staring eyes, Otto takes from the box an inkwell and a reed pen, then starts to write something down on the parchment.

Whooooooooooa!! Writing! There is a person who can write here!! This is the first civilized man I have met in this world. I absolutely want him to teach me how to read this language!

As I think, my gaze is fixed on Otto's hands as if I were going to devour them. My dad places a hand on my head and ruffles my hair. "What is it?" he asks.

I look up at my father, then point at the parchment-looking thing. If I don't figure out what it's called, I won't be able to ask about it in the future. "Daddy, Daddy! What's that?" I ask.
"Ah, that's parchment!" he says. "It's a paper made from the skin of goats or sheep."
"What's this black stuff?"
"That's ink, and that's a pen."

As I thought! I've found paper and ink, so I can make books. I'm so happy that I could start dancing, but I try to stay calm. I clasp my hands tightly in front of me, look endearingly up at my father, and start begging with all my might.

"Hey, Daddy. Can I have that?"
"No, Maine, that's not a kid's toy."

Even though I'd tried to project every last mote of adorable little girl charm, he rejected my pleas immediately. Of course, just because I've been shot down, doesn't mean I'm not going to stop trying.

When it comes to books, I clamp down on them like a snapping turtle and stick to them like gum on a shoe. You really shouldn't underestimate my adhesion!

"I wanna write like this! I really do. Pleeeease!"
"You just can't, Maine! You don't even know how to write."

Certainly, if you don't know how to write, then you don't need any paper or ink. For this very reason, now's my greatest chance to twist my father's words back around.

"Ah, I'll learn if you teach me! If I learn, then can I have that?"

The younger, lower-ranked soldier can write, so it's likely that my father, who seems to be his superior, can write as well. I never would have thought that someone who knew how to write would live in a house without a single sheet of paper, but I'm happy to have been proven wrong. If my father can teach me how to read and write, then reading the books of this world is no longer an impossible dream.

As I sit there with a huge smile plastered over my face, feeling like I've gotten one step closer to realizing my ambitions, someone lets out a muffled snort. I look around, trying to find the source, and see Otto barely holding in his laughter, as if our father-daughter conversations about pen and ink are almost too much to bear.

"Ahahaha, 'teach me', she says… heh heh, sir, aren't you pretty bad at writing?"

With a sharp snap, cracks spiderwebbed throughout my ambition. My smile freezes on my face, like someone's dumped a bucket of ice water all over me.

"Huh? Daddy, can you not write?"
"I can read, more-or-less, and write too. My job involves paperwork, so I need to know how to read, but I've never really needed to know any characters outside of the ones I use at work. Just enough so that I can write down the names of people who come from far away, after I hear them."[2]

"Ohhh…," I sigh, staring at my father with a sullen expression on my face as he makes his excuses. So, it seems that my father's literacy level is such that he's only got a basic grasp of the alphabet to the point where if his class assignment was to write out his friend's names then he could. The young Otto, though, said "pretty bad", so he must be on the level of a

first grader, who'd still make some mistakes with his classmate's names. To be frank: worthless.

"Hey now, don't look at your father like that!" says Otto, the person who caused my opinion of my father to drop so dramatically, with a nervouse look on his face as he scolds me. Then, as if he's covering for my father, he starts to explain the duties of a soldier.

"The job of a soldier is to keep the peace in the town, but when there's big events that the nobility put on, the knights usually are the ones who get the written instructions, and for smaller events all of the coordination is done verbally. We don't really see a lot of different characters. Just being able to write people's names is enough."

My father had a chance to pull himself together while Otto was covering for him, and has pulled his pride back together. It seems like my unimpressed stare hurt his feelings unexpectedly much.

"Barely anyone knows how to read amongst the peasantry, except for the village leaders. I'm pretty amazing already, you know!" he says, his chest puffed out.
"Whoa, you really are amazing, Daddy! Can I have this? Pleeeease?"

You're amazing, Daddy, so you want to give your beloved daughter with a hundred sheets of paper as a present, with fanfare. I stare into his eyes as I layer on the extortion, but he wavers a little and retreats a step.

"……One page would make an entire month's wages disappear, so giving it to a kid…"

What did you say?! An entire month's wages?! Wh… how much could parchment *cost*?! This… even though I'm not a child, this is not the kind of thing that you should dangle just out of my reach!

The reason why there's no paper in the house, the reason why there's no bookstores in this town, they're all the same. The price just isn't one that us commoners can afford to pay. No matter how much I beg for paper, my family barely makes enough money to keep us fed. Nobody's going to buy me paper.

I drop my shoulders, a defeated look on my face. Otto pats me gently on the head, trying to cheer me up.

"Paper's not the kind of thing you can find in stores that commoners can enter, anyway. It's the kind of thing that's only used by the nobility and the people they work with, like important merchants and government officials, so it's not something that kids can use anyway. If you want to learn how to write, why not use a slate? How about I give you the one I used to use when I was just learning?"
"Really? That would be great!"

I immediately nod, and graciously make arrangements to get the slate. I've waited so long, and I really want to learn how to write too, so I'm going to figure out how to press Otto into serving as my teacher.

“Thanks, Mr. Otto! Please, could you teach me how to write? I’m counting on you!”

As I pressure Otto with my adorable smile, my father looks back and forth between the two of us with a pitiful expression on his face, but I’m not paying attention.

Being able to practice writing, getting a slate to write on, these things are enough to set my heart soaring, but what I truly want, *books*, require paper. After all, you can’t preserve anything on a slate. A slate is something that you write on and erase many times, like a chalkboard. It’s great for practicing how to write, but you can’t use it as a book.

It hadn’t even crossed my mind that paper might be something that just wasn’t sold to commoners. Hmm, how can I make any books if I don’t have any paper? If I can’t just acquire any paper, what should I do? What can I do?

Can’t I just make it myself?

Before I make any books, I’m going to need to start by making my own paper. However, making paper really isn’t all that simple. I don’t think it’s the kind of thing that I can just pass off as a kid playing around.

Grr, the road to books is long!!

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. She describes the possible dimension of the room as “six-tatami”, referring to a standardized room layout that’s 270 cm by 360 cm. A Western audience needs this explained, but reading off those numbers would be oddly specific, so I rounded up to 3 meters by 4 meters.
2. It seems as though the writing system is based off of Japanese (no surprise), which has both a phonetic alphabet, where characters correspond to generic sounds, and a logographic alphabet, where specific characters mean specific things with specific readings. Knowing enough to write someone’s name down means that Maine’s father knows the phonetic alphabet, so he can write things that he hears, but doesn’t know how to “spell” them correctly with the right logograms. (For a more Western example, imagine having to write down Arnold Schwarzenegger’s name having only heard it once. Then imagine that everyone’s names are that hard to spell.)

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009Respect for Ancient Egypt

Now then, even though I have my heart absolutely set on making books, I have yet to actually secure a source of paper. My Japanese sensibilities are telling me that I should just go to an office supply store, where they sell five hundred sheets of copy paper for two hundred yen[1], but in the world I live in now, just one page of parchment would make an entire month's worth of my father's salary disappear.

To make that just one page, a hide has to be stripped, all of the fur shaved off, and then from the largest usable part of a single animal's hide, sheets must be cut that are of a size that's easy to work with. The page that I saw at my father's workplace was about the size of an A4 sheet of paper[2]. If I were to cut up a single page of parchment, I wouldn't get more than about five to eight usable pages. To put it plainly, it's so expensive that there's no way a commoner like me could possibly buy enough to write a book.

So, if I'm going to make a book, I need to make some paper.

However, I know nothing about how to actually make paper other than what I've read in books. After all, paper has always been something that I could just go to a store and buy. I could go into any drugstore and find loose-leaf paper and notebooks with the rest of the school supplies. I lived in a world where people would just hand out little notepads on the street as promotional items. Banks gave out free calendars, and my mailbox was stuffed full of unwanted flyers that went straight into the trash.

If I had one of those unwanted flyers now, I'd read every last word on it, and treasure every centimeter of the margin. A world where paper can be obtained so easily is such a luxurious one. Viva, Japan! If I were to be reborn someday, Japan would be nice.

To make things worse, there aren't any machines here for making paper! If I don't have a machine to help me, the entire process is going to have to be done entirely through my own manual labor.

You must be thinking that the solution to my problems is so obvious, now that I've been reborn in an alternate world without machines. I read a lot of books, you're thinking, so I have a lot of knowledge that I can use, right? …Please, think about it for a little bit.

All I ever wanted to do was read, and I thought that even using electrical appliances to do the daily chores was too much work. You think that such a worthless Japanese woman could suddenly start doing all the manual labor required to make paper by hand? On top of that, my current body is a child, with a weak constitution, who simply can't do some things, isn't allowed to do others, and is otherwise extremely restricted in action.

In conclusion: there's no way in hell.

However, it's too early to give up. Throughout the world's history, businesses and governments have needed to keep records. This goes back to ancient times, but machine-made paper certainly isn't that old. In other words, I might be able to take the ancient

methods used in ancient times and reproduce them here and now.

Hmmm, what did they do before they had machines?

I scrunch up my eyebrows and open my tiny five-year-old's hands (more like three-year-old's because of my tiny physique) as far as they can go, concentrating hard.

Ancient civilizations, ancient civilizations… If you're talking about ancient civilizations, Ancient Egypt is first on the list! And, if you're talking about Ancient Egypt, you have to talk about papyrus! Three cheers for Ancient Egypt!

Thanks to that word-association game, I've hit upon the idea of making Papyrus like the Ancient Egyptians did. If it's something they invented in ancient history, I should be able to do it myself, somehow, even with my tiny hands.

I think that they made it out of some kind of plant, like a straight tree or tall grass… probably. Here, there are plenty of plants. I'm positive that I could find plants suitable for making paper scattered around the forest.

Yeah, the forest. Let's go to the forest.

Whenever it came to books, I'd always happily do whatever impossible legwork I needed to do. My family, and even little Shu always looked on with wonder, then sighed in lament. So, now that I've got this idea, I want to implement it immediately. I try begging Tory to take me with her to the forest.

"Tory, I wanna go to the forest too! Can I go w—"
"Eh?! You?! No way!"

She shot me down before I even had a chance to finish talking. She reacted so fast that it was obvious she hadn't even had to think twice. On top of that, she said "no way", not "you shouldn't", which implied that there wasn't any room for me to change her mind, which really hurt.

"Why not?"
"You couldn't make it there, you know?" she says, then starts counting the reasons off on her fingers. "If you can't make it to the gates, you absolutely can't make it all the way to the forest. And when we go to the forest, we're going to gather firewood, fruits, and nuts, right? You really can't take it easy out there. Also, can you even climb a tree? And when we're coming back, would you be able to carry a big, heavy box on your back while you walk? If we wanted to make it back before the gates closed for the day, we wouldn't be able to take any breaks on the way back. There's no way you can do it, see?"

The list is a little long, but it essentially all boils down to "you're not strong enough".

"Also," she says, "it's almost winter, so there aren't really many things we can find in the forest right now…"

Even if I were to make it, there isn't really anything to harvest, she's saying.

This is really tough. Do I go to the forest even though there might not be anything to harvest, or do I give up on making paper? This decision is way too tough.

Tory notices the deep look of worry on my face. "What do you want to get?" she asks, tilting her head to one side. "There's not going to be many melia fruits left, you know."

Melia fruits are what I've been making our simple shampoo out of. We haven't been eating the fruits Tory brings back; instead, we've been extracting all of the oil from them and storing it. Then, occasionally, we use it as a moisturizer for our hair.

I'd be happy to get more melia, but the important thing here is not beauty, it's books. I need plant fibers to use as raw materials for my pseudo-papyrus.

"Ummm… are there any *'plants whose fibers can be easily extracted'*?"
"Eh? What?"

Tory has a dubious look on her face, so I repeat myself. That's definitely the face of someone who did not understand my Japanese. I think for a moment, then try to explain it again using very easy-to-understand words.

"…I need grass with a straight, fat stalk. I just want the stalk."

"Hmmm…" Tory ponders my question. Does she have some kind of idea? I watch her intently as I wait for a reply. After a little while, she shrugs her shoulders with a resigned look on her face.

"Sure, I'll try asking Ralph and Lutz for help."
"Huh?" She didn't say she was going to do it for me, but she said she'd try?

I don't quite understand what she's getting at, and I tilt my head to one side. Tory seems a little surprised by my reaction. I blink a few times, my head tilted confusedly, as if to ask her what she said just now.

"Ralph's family raises chickens, you know? They need a lot of feed to make it through the winter."

Uh, even if you say "you know," I didn't actually know that. Tory's saying these things as if they're blatantly obvious, though, so I keep my actual reaction hidden. "Oh yeah!" I say.

"So, I'll offer to help them gather grass, then I'll try asking them for some stalks. The seasons where we get a lot of grass are over now, so there might not be that much, okay?"
"That's okay! Thanks, Tory!"

Really, Tory, you're an amazing older sister.

The next day, I accompany Tory downstairs as she leaves to go to the forest, and ask Ralph

and Lutz if they'll help me. They agree to do it, and I breathe a small sigh of relief. However, there's no way I'm going to rely solely on them.

I'm going to go and gather some grass myself. Fortunately, grass grows around the well in the places the paving stones don't cover. I don't know if the stalks can be used, though.

"Mommy, I want to go down to the well with you."
"Oh! Do you want to help out?"
"Nuh-uh. Something else." It might be kind of rude, but if I spend all my time helping out, I won't be able to gather any grass. "I wanna gather grass." I show her the little basket Tory made earlier.
"Ah, do your best."

I may have refused to help out, but she's still letting me accompany her down, whether it's because she doesn't want to get in the way of my enthusiasm or because she's happy that I have enough strength to move around like this.

Once again, I go down the stairs, following my mother as she carries the laundry down. This is my second trip today, so just going down the stairs made me so winded that there's no way I can gather any grass.

I rest next to my mother as she draws water from the well, then uses a foul-smelling, not-foamy, animal-based detergent to start scrubbing away at the laundry.

"Ohh! If it isn't little Maine!" calls out a woman, who I don't recognize, in a friendly voice.
"Good morning," I say politely.
"Ah, Carla!" says my mother, with a smile. "Morning. You're up early today."

From my mother's reaction, it would seem that I'm misremembering. This must be an acquaintance of Maine's. I try to keep my lack of recognition off of my face while I dig through my memories a little.

I really do know this person. According to my memory, this is Ralph and Lutz's mother. She's got a fairly strong build and, hmmmm, actually seems like a very reliable person.

So, should I something like, "thanks for all your help"? Wait, no, no, that is absolutely not what a five-year-old would say. What does a little kid say to an older woman that she's on really good terms with? Someone, help!

Carla looks over at me as I'm caught up in spinning thoughts around my head, then goes to draw water from the well. She hauls the bucket up effortlessly, then starts washing her own laundry as well. Of course, she's using the foul animal-based soap.

"How are you doing today, Maine?" she asks. "It's rare to see you outside."
"I'm picking some grass! Ralph and Lutz said that they're gathering it for the chickens."
"Aww, for us? You shouldn't have," she says, in a tone of voice that seems to imply that it's no big deal either way as she continues to pound away at her laundry.

She, along with my mother, is having a lively conversation about this and that with the other mothers that have gathered around the well. Incidentally, it's amazing how all of these mothers are talking so much while continuing to work so diligently.

Nevertheless, this soap really stinks. If you tried using some herbs to help erase the smell, wouldn't it be nicer? Or maybe would the two smells multiply and turn into an unbearable stench?

Reminded of my plans for improvement, I stand up and start tearing grass from the ground. I try to look for plants with thick, straight stalks that I can use, but I can't actually tear those out with my own strength.

Doing this with my bare hands is impossible. Someone, get me a sickle, please…

Of course, no sickle arrives, and there's no way I can get any of this with just my bare hands. Well, whatever. I'm going to just rely on Tory, Ralph, and Lutz, who went to the forest to help feed the chickens.

I've given up on finding grass that I can use, so I start pulling up the little sprouts or weaker leaves that the chickens might be able to eat. Even I can pull these out with no problem.

"Maine, it's time to go!" calls my mother, holding her tub full of tightly wrung-out clothes. It seems like she's done with the laundry already. I've barely filled my little basked halfway, but my mother has to go to work today, and there's no way I'm going to get scolded for being selfish. I pick up my basket, and start walking back home.

"Are you all set?" she asks. "Right, let's go."
"Okay!"

When I first became Maine, I had a fever and my mother was taking time off from work to take care of me, so I didn't know anything but how life inside my own home was like. Now that I'm healthy again, it seems that I'm going to be left in the care of my elderly neighbor, who's agreed to babysit me.

If she hadn't, Tory wouldn't be able to go to the forest. Got it.

"Mommy's got to go to work now, Maine. Be a good girl and keep quiet, okay?"
"Okay!"
"I'll leave her to you, Gerda."
"Right, right," she says. "Come, Maine."

Gerda's place is full of other children, being watched over just like me. All of these kids are basically infants, who could only really escape by toddling away. In this town, when you're about three years old, you're strong enough to start going with your older brothers and sisters to the forest and helping out with the chores. In short, it seems like my family thinks that I'm as weak as a toddler, and can't stay at home by myself.

What the heck?!

As I fume about my family's shocking evaluation of my own worth, I see a boy pick up a toy that had fallen on the ground and move to stick it in his mouth. Next to him, a tiny little girl suddenly started crying and hitting him.

"Whoa, gross!" I exclaim. "Don't put that in your mouth!"
"Oh my," says the old lady.
"Don't just start hitting him," I say to the little girl. "What's going on?"
"Now, now," says the old lady.

I'm supposed to be just another kid getting baby-sat, but as the biggest kid around I've started watching out for the other kids.

"Oh my," "now, now," what the heck! Gerda, old lady, do your job!

While I help Gerda put the littlest kids to sleep, I start thinking about how I'm going to turn the grass stalks I'm going to get into papyrus.

Honestly, I don't really remember how papyrus was made. I never actually had to know.

Certainly, I remember seeing papyrus. It was remarkably thick, with fibers running horizontally and vertically. The fibers on the back were different from the ones on the front and only one side was writable, and there was a note to the side instructing us not to bend it… but there wasn't anything written there about how it was made.

Even more troubling, I can't remember what the photo I saw of it getting made even looked like. I have a hunch about how I might make the fibers all run in the right direction, but how do I bond them together? Is it like rice paper? Do I need some kind of glue or binding agent?

As I think back on how those historical documents neglected to mention these important details, my head tilts to one side. For now, I think I'll try taking a part of the fibers from the hardest stems, then weaving them horizontally and vertically as tightly as I can. With this, I think I won't need any sort of binding agent. That parchment seemed kind of cloth-like, and this is still my first time making pseudo-papyrus, so if I'll be satisfied if I can just get a page i can write on.

"Maine, someone's here for you," says Gerda.
"Toooryyyy~!"

It's evening time, so Tory and the others have come back from the forest to pick me up. I'm so relieved. I was so glad to hear that someone came for me. That emotion sweeps over me, and I cling tightly to Tory.

Old lady Gerda's babysitting did not involve looking after anyone. If something wasn't very dangerous, she'd just leave it be. If someone peed somewhere, she'd wipe it up with a wet cloth and do nothing else. The room reeked of filth. Since I've got the common knowledge of Japan stuck in my head, it's obvious that this day-care is truly terrible. Leaving your kids with a baby-sitter like that is truly terrible.

Really, I want to do something about it, but the problem's too big for my tiny hands. I can't do any of the things I'm thinking of with my own hands, and I also don't know if Gerda's methods are common or not around here. If I start complaining, they might think that I'm the crazy one. I really wanted to run away from that deplorable environment as fast as I could. I waited in agony, wishing that someone would hurry up and come get me.

"What's wrong, Maine?" asks Tory, patting me on the head. "Did you get lonely after staying there for so long?"
"When you get a little bit stronger, you can totally start coming with us to the forest," says Ralph. "It would be great if you could come with us in the spring!" says Lutz.

I suddenly realize that I absolutely must get stronger. Every single one of my problems has been because I'm too weak.

"Oh, right!" says Ralph. "Here's the grass stalks we promised you." He reaches into his basket and grabs a fistful of grass to show me. In an instant, my worries about the old lady Gerda are blasted out of my head. The important thing here is not old ladies, it's books. It's paper.

"Oh, so much! I'm so happy! Hey, while I was down at the well, I helped get you some grass too!"

I stand tall and proud as I deliver this information, but for some reason the three of them just pat my head. To make things worse, Lutz looks down at me with a warm smile, like he's praising me for having tried my hardest.

Hey, how much does everyone think that I'm a child that can't do anything useful? …I mean, I guess I can't actually do real work, though.

I exchange the grass I'd collected in the little basket that Tory made for the grass that the three of them had collected for me.

Now then, with this, it's time to make some pseudo-papyrus.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. 200 yen is roughly two US dollars.
2. For American audiences: A4 paper is analogous to 8.5" x 11".

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010Preparing for Winter

I had originally planned to start working on turning the grass stalks that the other kids had gathered for me into my pseudo-papyrus, but it seems like fate had other plans for me.

"Maine," says my mother, grabbing me by the scruff of my neck as I try to slip out the door.
"Eep?!" I squeak, startled.
"Where do you think you're going? I told you, today we have to start preparing for the winter, right?"

I was trying to go down to the well so that I could start working on extracting the plant fibers from these stalks.

Soon, we'll all be stuck indoors as the long winter creeps in, so we'll have to make preparations in advance. Why, though, am I being pressed into service? I'm so weak that I'm not good for anything! According to Maine's memories, all she ever did was catch a cold, then spend all that time uselessly wandering around. In other words, I'm completely useless. (I'm hoping I don't actually catch a cold, though.)

"You'll go help your father, Maine. Come," she says.
"Doesn't Daddy have work?"
"It's his turn to take a few days off. It wouldn't be good if the soldiers couldn't prepare for winter, you know?"

…Giving employees time off to go prepare for winter is an unexpectedly reasonable thing for an employer to do. On top of that, is preparing for the winter really so hard that it requires a man's help?

Regardless, even if my father is home, it's unusual for me to be paired up with him. He's a muscle-headed soldier, after all, so it's usually the much more fit and energetic Tory that winds up going with him.

Since the entire family's home, I don't think I'll be able to escape. And, since it seems like my father's specifically nominated me, I've got no choice but to follow him.

"…So what are we going to do?" I ask.

Next to the kitchen window, my father is pulling out some things that look like tools.

"We're going to go through the house and do a little maintenance on anything that needs it. The door's what's going to protect us from a big snowstorm, so we need to make sure the hinges are tight, there's no rust, and there aren't any holes in the wood. When we're done with that, we're going to clean out the chimney and the flue for the stove. We don't want to have any problems with those during the winter."
"Huhhh…"

I understand what needs to be done, but how the hell am I supposed to help with any of that? I can barely hold a screwdriver, much less turn it. I can't carry anything heavy, either!

You can see these skinny little arms right?!

However, if I'm enthusiastic about doing whatever little bit I can to help out, it'll go a long way to helping build up my family's confidence in me. I can definitely help identify the loose parts on the hinges, and my modern-age knowledge will make spotting rust a piece of cake.

"Daddy, on this hinge, isn't this nail getting rusty?" I say, pointing at a nail.
My father bends down to study it. "…Looks like it'll hold for now."

Uh, wait, no matter how you look at it, a worn-out nail like this is going to rust away, right?

I'm immediately worried by how confidently my father said that. Once winter hits, this door's our main defense against a snowstorm, so it breaking down halfway through would be very bad for us. I climb up on a chair so I can reach the door, and try to rattle it back and forth. No matter how confident my father may be, if I'm able to break it like this, then surely he'd recognize my superior judgement.

After I wiggle the door a few times, the top hinge pops off with a sharp ping, and the door starts to precariously sway on its one remaining hinge. I nod in satisfaction, but my father's face goes ghastly white as he sees the door wobble.

"M- Maine?!"
"Looook, it broke!" I say, pointing at the door. "It wasn't going to last the winter. Make sure you fix it, Daddy!"

My father, pretending to ignore his judgement error, helps me down off the chair. "Maybe you should go help your mother now."

Perhaps he's upset that his daughter pointed out his mistake? I shrug my shoulders, shaking my head. It can't be helped, I'm not going anywhere. My mother specifically assigned me to help my father, so I'm going to stay next to him and continue my inspections. I'm going to make sure that we make it safely and comfortably through the winter.

"Huh?" I say. "I've got to make sure you've found everything! We're fixing things so they don't break in the winter, so we shouldn't leave things all beat up like that."
"We can't afford to fix everything, and I can't have you around breaking everything you can. Go see your mother."

…Money problems, again!

I thought I'd be able to make my father take things a little more seriously by breaking the hinge. Instead, I'm having to quietly make my way to the bedroom to go help Tory and my mother.

The two of them are hanging shirts and blankets from clotheslines, as if they were trying to dry them, and rearranging the beds to be closer to the kitchen stove, trying to make the place just a little bit warmer.

"What's wrong, Maine?"
"Daddy said that I should come help you instead, Mommy."
"Oh? Well, we're almost done with this, so next we're going to work on getting some more light in here. We should have some beeswax this year. We've also got some tallow and some tree nuts, so we'll spend some time squeezing some oil for the lamp and making a few candles."

Just hearing about the work makes me wrinkle my nose. I've been smelling the stench of animal fats coming from various other houses lately, but the thought of filling our own kitchen with that stink makes me feel really uneasy.

Tory heads off to the storage room to start pressing oil out of the nuts. I, however, don't have enough strength to swing a hammer, so I can't seek shelter in the storage room with her.

Next to my mother, our largest saucepan sits over the fire, filled with nothing but beef tallow.

It *stinks*!! Hang in there, me…

I might be able to bear this stench for now, but it looks like the total extent of my mother's preparation is only just melting the tallow alone and skimming off the impurities that rise to the top.

"Wait, Mommy, is that really all you're doing? You're not going to *'salt it out'*?"
"Hmm? What was that?"

Oh, crap. "Salting out" is so extremely obvious, but it looks like she doesn't know about it.

I try not to flinch as my mother's stare drills into me, as if she's asking me if I *really* have a problem. As best as I can, I try to explain the process using only simple words.

"It's, um… where you add salt water, then you cook it over the fire a little more, and then you strain out the dirt multiple times?"
"Salt water?" she asks.
"Yeah. When you leave it alone and it cools down, only the fat on top will harden, and the water on the bottom will stay liquid, you know? Then, you can take out the water, and only use the fat that was on top. It's more work, but it will smell a lot better, and it'll be a higher quality fat, too."

I don't know if it's because I said "higher quality" or not, but my mother starts salting out the tallow. The quality of the candles that we're going to be burning throughout the entire winter is literally a life-or-death matter for me. We're going to be trapped indoors with it, after all. Living in a house filled with that kind of stench for the whole winter would be far too much for me to bear.

I don't actually know the right concentration of salt we should be using, but even just a little should make things better, right?

I guessed on the concentration, but as we salted out the tallow, it gradually started turning from a dirty yellow to a pure white. We'll be able to use this to make candles, and then when spring comes around and we need to make soap, we can melt the candles again and re-use the tallow.

Not one to waste anything, my mother uses the chunks of meat and bone that we filtered out of the tallow to make a delicious soup stock, which we have for lunch. After that, we start making the candles.

"Now then," says my mother. "Tory, please work on the candles. Your father and I will go and start working on the firewood."
"Okaay!" says Tory, cheerfully.

…Uh, what am I supposed to do, then?

The three of them stand up and get to work. I think about it for a little while, then decide to follow along behind my mother, who's about to step out the front door. I guess I'm going to continue trying to help her out. She notices me, however, and points firmly back towards the kitchen table.

"Maine, go help Tory with the candles. Try not to get in the way."
"…Fine."

Why do you have so little trust in me?

I turn back to the kitchen, where Tory is cutting string into lots of equal lengths to use as wicks. She ties them to wooden sticks, letting them dangle. She takes each stick and starts to dip the strings into and out of the pot of tallow, one by one. As she dips them over and over, tallow starts to soak into and harden around each string, gradually building in circumference with each repetition. Slowly, candles start to take shape.

"Huh, so is that how you make candles…" I muse.
"Maine, don't just watch, help me!" says Tory, scowling.

Tory's starting to get mad, so I decide to help out. I chop up some herbs to erase the scent, then take some candles from the pile so that I can start rolling them in the herbs. They'll have some effect when they're stuck to the outside of the candle, but next year, I'm going to make sure that these herbs get mixed in to the tallow as it melts.

"Maine! Don't play around!" says Tory.
"…I'm only going to use these ones. It's better to have candles that aren't smelly, right? Please, Tory!"
"Okay, fine, but only those ones!"

I nod vigorously to show that Tory's made herself clear.

I don't know if this will work or not, so I wasn't planning on doing this to every candle anyway. I get the herbs attached to five of the candles, varying the amount and positioning

so that I can try to figure out what will produce the best result.

While Tory and I keep working like that on the candles, our parents work on preparing enough firewood. There's so much careful preparation that goes into preparing for the winter, but it's necessary if we don't want to freeze to death. To supplement the kindling that Tory brought back, my father's brought back a huge number of logs, each half a meter long, that he went out and purchased. He's currently splitting them into firewood, his hatchet beating out a steady rhythm as he works. My mother collects the wood as it splits apart, then carries it to another room to stack it up for later.

"Mommy, where are you taking that?" I ask, startled, as she opens a door to a room I'd never seen before. This is the first time I've noticed it, but attached to the storage room is what seems to be an additional storage room. It looks like it might not be used for anything but storing materials that were prepared for the winter. Already, the room is half-filled with chopped wood.

"Huh?" I ask, following her in. "What's this room for?"
"It's… the winter storage room, you know?" she says. "Maine, why are you asking about this now?"

Come to think of it, I had been wondering where the heck all of the firewood that Tory had brought back was being stored, but it looks like it's being kept in here. We typically keep the firewood we use on a day-to-day basis in the storage room, so I guess I just never noticed the other room.

"…It's cold."
"Well, this is the farthest place in the house from the stove, after all."

Our house doesn't have a dedicated living room with a beautiful fireplace, so the kitchen stove is the only real source of heat in the entire house. We spend most of every day in the kitchen, as a result.

Also, since the bedroom is separated from the kitchen (and the stove) by a wall, we've pushed all of the beds in the room up against the closest wall. While the stove burns, the heat radiates through the wall, so when it's time for the children to go to bed the beds are quite warm. They're only warm right when we go to bed, however. Our mother quenches the fire before she goes to bed, so the room is piercingly cold by the time we wake up.

This winter storage room, however, is the furthest room away from the stove, so it's very cold in here. During the winter, this room looks like it would be great for storing food, preserves, and maybe even oil for a while, kind of like a natural refrigerator.

"Wow, we have a lot of wood," I say, amazed.
"We might just barely have enough, don't you think?"

Even though the room's half-full?!

Looking at the pile of firewood before me, I suddenly start thinking about the problem of

deforestation. If a single house burns this much firewood over the course of the winter, how much wood does this entire city go through in a single year?

"Maine, don't space out," says my mother. "Make sure you're ready for your handiwork."

I'm not spacing out!! Deforestation is a serious problem that merits significant thought!

Even as I try to object, my mother's already heading back out towards the kitchen. I hurry after her. I really don't want to be in that gloomy, window-less room by myself.

"Mommy, what's handiwork?"
"Hmm… well, the men might do things like repairing the tools they use for their jobs, or maybe use the time to make furniture. We need to make sure we have enough materials ready for that."
"Oh, it's the jobs we do during the winter?"

As I'm asking my questions, my mother is counting out how many balls of yarn she has. "That's right. As for women, making clothes is our most important job, you know? If we don't spin enough thread for weaving cloth or sewing, and if we don't dye things in advance, we won't be able to make anything. My job is dyeing thread, so I already have enough of that for now, but I'll need to spend some time preparing some plants, like nilen, to spin into more thread next year."
"Ohh…"
"On top of that, your sister's baptism is next summer! We're going to need brand new clothing for that, since it's a special day… Hm, and I'm going to need to make that this winter, while I have time…"

My mother's face goes fierce as she concentrates, calculating whether or not she'll have enough materials for the task. I don't want to interrupt her at all, so I quietly migrate downstairs to the well, where Tory is working.

"Tory, what are you doing for your handiwork?"
"I'm making baskets! I'll sell them in the spring."

Tory's already started preparing the materials she'll need for her work. She's brought down a bundle of sticks that she'd gathered in the forest, soaked them, and peeled the bark off. Now, it looks like she's using a knife to shave them down, parallel to the grain.

"Maine, what will you do?" she asks.
"Me? I'm going to make some *'pseudo-papyrus'*."
"What's that?"
"Eheheh, it's a seeeecret!"

Following Tory's example in getting a head start on my winter's work, I'll start separating the fibers I'll need to make my pseudo-papyrus. This is an extremely important part of my preparation! This is a necessary task that nobody could possibly get mad at me about.

To extract the fibers, I can probably do something similar to what Tory's doing. I'll strip the

skin off of the grass stalks, soak them in water, and then dry them. Since there's not very much time left to finish our preparations, I wasn't able to get a whole lot of grass. Now, though, I can finally start working on separating out these plant fibers.

"Hey, Tory," I say, "can I get some water?"
"...Sure."
"Hey, Tory," I say, "how do you think I should take just the fibers out of this?"
"Huh? Ummmm..."
"Hey, Tory," I say, "these won't fly away if I dry them like this, right?"
"....."

I bundle up the plant fibers that I've managed to extract. There aren't a whole lot of them, but for the purposes of my experiments I should be able to make maybe one or two pages with this amount.

And, so, I conclude my final preparations for the coming winter. Whoof, man, I worked hard!

Huh? Why's Tory looking so exasperated?

011Slate: Acquired!

May contain disturbing content, see note 1 for details.

The most important part of preparing for the winter is stockpiling food. Unlike Japan, there aren't any supermarkets around here that stay open all year round. The winter weather closes down the town markets, and there aren't very many vegetables that can really be gathered outside. So, if you don't want to starve to death, procuring enough food in advance is indispensable.

And, so, here I am, sitting in a beat-up second-hand wagon amidst a huge pile of boxes. I was rudely awakened this morning, in pitch-blackness, long before the dawn had even begun to break.

"Now, then," my father cheerfully boomed, "today we're going to the farming village! Is everyone ready?"

There's no excuse for doing that.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, wondering what on Earth he's talking about. I scowled at him, but both my mother and Tory are beaming happily. What do I do? All I can do is follow along with the conversation.

"Come to think of it, Maine," said my mother, clapping her hands together, "you were out sick while we were talking about this earlier, so you might not have heard."

My father and Tory nodded in consent. Once again, I'd been left out of a family discussion. I wasn't the slightest bit amused. I tried to glare sullenly at them, but they'd already started quickly moving around as they got ready to leave.

"Anyhow, make sure you dress very warmly, Maine!" she said as she gathered boxes. "You got really sick last year!"

There's no way they were going to leave me to take care of myself all day, so I had no choice but to quietly follow along as she clattered her way downstairs.

…Nevertheless, why are we going to a farming village, anyway?

I had hoped to walk on my own power in order to work on building up some more strength, but my father, frustrated by how slow I was, picked me up and put me in the cart. Now, I'm riding amidst a variety of barrels, empty bottles, piles of cloth, bundles of cord, bags of salt, and all of the other things it seems like we need in order to go visit a farming village.

…Hmm? Perhaps, since I'm in this cart, I'm the most useless piece of luggage on this trip?

I don't have a whole lot of space up here, so I make myself as small as I can and settle down. Up front, my father is yoked to the cart, pulling it forward while my mother and Tory

push it from behind. It's becoming really obvious that I'm just extra weight on this trip, which is a little bit depressing.

"Hey, Mommy," I say, "Why're we going to a village?"
"There's not many places where we can go in the city to smoke our meat, you know?" she says. "So, we're going to the nearest village and borrowing one of their smoke huts."
"Smoking meat? Oh yeah, we did go buy a lot of meat the other day."

We already salted it, brined it, and did all sorts of other things to preserve that meat, but there's still more stuff to do? Is this process maybe a little too painful? Is the meat still okay?

As I count off the days since we bought the meat on my fingers, I grow more and more anxious. My mother looks over at me, shocked.

"What are you talking about? Today's pig-slaughtering day, you know. We're going to buy two pigs, then help everyone out to spread out the work, and then we'll all share the results."
"Uh?"

My ears instantly reject my mother's words. In the fraction of a second it takes the sounds to reach my brain, a chill starts running down my spine.

"P… P-p-p… pig-slaughtering day?!"
"It's a day where we go meet up with our neighbors, slaughter and butcher a few pigs, salt and smoke the meat, and make things like bacon, pot roasts, and sausage. Maine… oh, right, last year you stayed in the cart because you were so feverish."

If at *all* possible, I would like to get a fever this year too. If I can do that, then at the very least I might be able to shield my eyes from that grim display.

"Mommy, didn't we buy a ton of meat at the market the other day…?"
"There's no way that much meat would last the entire winter, you know? We bought that to supplement the meat we're going to get from slaughtering pigs today, since you know that won't be enough by itself either, right?"

I thought we had bought a huge amount of meat, but I hadn't even considered the possibility that what we bought was just to supplement our stocks. I have no idea whatsoever as to how much meat is truly required when preparing for the winter.

It looks like can't save myself from being dragged to pig-slaughtering day, so a wave of depression sweeps through my heart. In contrast, Tory is wearing her biggest smile while she pushes the cart onward.

"This is going to be fun!" she says. "We're going to get to help out, and then we'll get to eat freshly-made sausage. This is your first time helping, but when you get caught up in the noise and excitement everyone's making, it feels kinda like a mini festival! I'm excited that you're helping out this year!"
"'Everyone'?" I ask, tilting my head to the side in confusion.

My mother shoots me a look, as if asking me why I'm asking such obvious questions. "The rest of the neighbors, right? Slaughtering a pig is a big task, so it's not really easy to do it with less than ten adults, you know?"

Whoa, the neighbors, huh…

There's a lot of spots in Maine's memories that are really fuzzy, so there's no doubt that there will be a lot of people there who will know me even though I have no idea who they are. Far more troublesome, however, is what we've come to do today: slaughtering and butchering a pig. Just remembering the grisly spectacle at the market the other day sends chills down my spine.

"…I don't wanna go," I say.
"What are you saying?" asks my mother. "If we don't go, we're not going to have any sausage or bacon for the winter, you know?"

It seems like I'm not allowed to complain, since we don't have enough food for the winter otherwise. If we don't go, we'll starve, so no matter how much I complain, I'll still be forced to cooperate.

As my mood grows gloomier and gloomier, our cart reaches the southern gate of the city walls.

"Good morning," says a soldier, one of my father's subordinates, standing guard at the gate.
"Oh? Sir, are you running late? Everyone else already left the gates a long time ago."
"Yeah, I know…"

Somehow, it seems like our neighbors have are already long gone.

"Have a good day, sir."

The young-looking guard smiles and waves at me as we go past, and I make myself wave back. Being friendly is important.

This is my first time leaving the city since becoming Maine, so when the cart rumbles out of the short tunnel the gate is set into, I let out an astonished gasp. To be honest, I hadn't even thought that the environments inside and outside the city walls could be so different.

"Whoa…"

First of all, there aren't any houses. The streets within the city are always so crowded and claustrophobic, but this road widens into a broad highway as it leaves the gates. Off in the distance, I can see a village, with about ten to fifteen buildings that just look like dots on the horizon.

Also, the air is fantastic. As we leave, the accumulated stench of human filth dissipates into nothingness, leaving only sweet, clean air in its place. There are no walls here to trap in foul air.

Everywhere I look is green, from the light green of the rolling fields before me to the deep green of the tall, tall trees of the forest in the distance. Everything is extraordinarily tranquil.

"Maine, close your mouth before you bite off your tongue," warns my father.
"Eh?!"

Immediately after my father gives his warning, the cart lurches hard to the side, then starts to bounce and jostle even worse than it was doing so before. We've left the cobblestone roads of the city behind us, and the road ahead is packed, unpaved dirt. The luggage shakes around as if it might pop out of the cart, but, luckily, the ropes tied around it keep it in place. I, however, have no such security.

On a sunny day, you'd have to clatter over hard, uneven packed clay. On a rainy day, you'd have to slog through mushy, soggy mud. These roads are the worst! Pour some asphalt!

Unable to escape through my tightly-closed mouth, my objections bounce around in my head wildly. I cling, desperately, to the side of the cart, trying my hardest not to fall out.

"We're almost there," says my father.

Fifteen minutes after we left the city gates, we've arrived at the entrance to the farming village. The village is bustling, with countless people moving about.

Butchering pigs is primarily a man's work. Holding down a hundred-kilogram pig, trussing it up, and hoisting it all requires a good deal of strength. Meanwhile, the women handle setting up the smoking huts, getting huge amounts of water ready for boiling, making sure all of the tools and salt are ready, and doing other general prep work.

It looks like the slaughter had actually started just before we finally arrived. Of course, if you're not there to help, you don't get any meat.

"Oh no," exclaims my father, "they've already started!"
"That's not good!" says my mother. "Tory, hurry!"
"Yeah!"

The three of them let go of the cart, then pull out aprons made from some sort of thick, heavy material that looks like it's been heavily covered with wax. My mother and Tory run towards the smoking huts, where quite a few women have already gathered, putting on their aprons as they ran. My father ties his apron on securely, grabs the spear he uses for work out of the back of the wagon, then dashes towards the town square.

That was fast!!

In the blink of an eye, my family abandoned me before I had any time to react. I might still be able to run after my mother, but I have no idea what I'd be supposed to do in such a huge crowd, so it's only natural that I'm apprehensive about that idea. Since this is a yearly event, it looks like everyone already knows what they need to do from common knowledge. Give

me the instruction manual, please…

Since I'd just get in the way if I tried to help, I'll stay here and watch over the cart until someone calls for me. I sit down amongst the rest of the abandoned luggage, staring off into space, convincing myself that what I'm doing is an important task.

However, the spot where my father chose to leave his luggage is in full view of the village square, where they're doing the slaughtering. There's a little bit of distance between me and the square, but I can clearly hear the agonized squeals of one of the pigs and plainly see as it frantically tries to escape.

A rope has been tied to a wooden stake set firmly in the ground. The other end of the rope has already been tied around the pig's right hindleg. The men chase it around and around the stake, desperately trying to catch and hold it down. I see a flash of familiar pink hair amongst the crowd; Ralph and Lutz are undoubtedly in there.

"Here I come!" yells my father, charging onto the battlefield with spear at the ready. He sets his spear, then with a mighty shout, pierces into the pig with a single, strong thrust. The pig collapses to the ground from that one strike, convulsing in its death throes before finally falling still.

I squeak in horror as all the blood drains from my face, but the people in the plaza start cheering for my father. My mother runs out, carrying a metal container, kind of like a bucket, on a somewhat lengthy wooden pole. Another woman follows, bringing with her some kind of large bowl.

I have no idea what they're about to do, so I lean forward to get a better look. In the next instant, blood suddenly flies out, and some people's aprons are stained bright, dripping red. Preparations for catching the blood had just been finished, it seems, so my father had yanked out the spear and caused blood to start spurting from the wound. Reflexively, I clamp my hand over my mouth and fall back into the wagon.

The pig is concealed from view behind the skirt of the woman with the bowl, but I can see how she collects the massive amounts of blood in her bowl, transferring it to the bucket whenever it gets full. This seems to be her everyday job, from the way she moves. My mother, on the other hand, has her brow deeply furrowed as she puts all of her strength behind churning the blood as it's poured into the bucket.

…My mother's pretty scary.

Then, the pig was brought over to a specially prepared tree and strung up, upside down, from a sturdy branch. All of the blood that hadn't been completely drained from the body starts to drip down.

Now, it's time for the real butchering to begin. A man steps forward, wielding a thick, heavy butcher's knife, and vertically slits the pig's belly open.

That's about all I can remember. When I wake up, I'm no longer in the village, but instead in some room made of stone. Judging by what I can see of the ceiling from where I'm laying, this isn't my house. I blink my eyes to clear them, then I suddenly recall what I was watching just before I fainted. I feel terrible, suddenly.

It's strange, though. I can't shake the feeling that I'd seen something like this before.

What would it have been? Something where something got hung up, then carved apart…

It feels like it's on the tip of my tongue, but I can't quite make the connection. I don't think this is one of Maine's memories, I think this is one of mine. I think I saw something similar to this in Japan…

Oh, got it! I was at a fish market near the harbor in Ibaraki, and I watched them hang up an enormous goosefish and slice it apart! I remember it clearly now.

Now that I think about it, there are some similarities between slaughtering a pig and the live fish cleaning show. There are some things that really can only be eaten when they're really fresh, and I can understand how everyone seemed to find it such a fun sight to see.[2]

Well, I can understand it in theory, but I don't personally find it all that fun. For one thing, a tuna fish don't scream sorrowfully when you kill them, and the blood doesn't drip thickly out of it. Urgh, I really don't feel well…

I cover my mouth and roll over on my side, which causes me to fall off of whatever I was sleeping on with a thud.

"Oww…"

I push myself up with my arms to get a better view of my surroundings. It seems like I had been laid down on a smallish wooden bench. There's a fireplace nearby, with a fire crackling inside, so I don't feel cold at all. I don't, however, see anyone nearby, nor do I hear any voices.

…So, where am I?

As I try to figure out where exactly as I am, a soldier peers into the room, drawn by the thud I made when I fell down.

"Oh! You're awake," he says.
"Mister Otto?"

I sigh in relief, seeing a familiar face. If Otto is here in this stone building, then this must be either one of the waiting rooms or the night duty room at the city gates. Now that I know where I am, my anxiety gradually starts to dissipate.

"Ah, you remember me, then?" he says, relief showing plainly on his face. Since I look like a little girl, I'm sure he was worried that I'd start crying if I woke up and saw someone I didn't

know, and then he wouldn't know what to do.

"I didn't forget!" This man, after all, is one of the precious few cultured people in this world, and the man who is going to (hopefully) teach me how to read and write.

I give my best imitation salute, tapping my chest with my fist. Otto smiles wryly, ruffles my hair in response, and starts to explain my present situation.

"The corporal brought you here a little while ago, looking really embarrassed. Apparently, you collapsed in your wagon. He said he'll come by to pick you up as soon as he's done with what he needs to do in the village."

I don't know how long it takes to butcher a pig, but even after it's butchered there's a lot of processing work that needs to be done, so I don't think it's the kind of thing that's going to be over quickly.

…Now that I think about, Tory said that there was going to be dinner made with really fresh meat, didn't she?

It seems like I might be waiting here for quite some time. I'd brought the materials for my fake papyrus with me in the cart, since I didn't know if I was going to be waiting around for a while in the village. Unfortunately, I don't have any of it with me now.

"What's wrong, Maine?" asks Otto, "Are you lonely because your mom and dad aren't here?"
"…No," I say, shaking my head. "I'm just wondering what I should do while I wait?"

I accidentally let slip my true motives. Otto stares at me for a little bit, then mutters something about remembering that I look a couple years younger than I really am.

"I've got just the thing, Maine," he says, retrieving something from nearby. "How about we kill some time with this?"
"Whoa! A slate!"

Otto hands me the slate. He must have known that I'd definitely come through the gates today, so he would have brought it with him to give to me. He's cultured, he's considerate, he's kind, he's too amazing!!

"I have to stand guard at the gate today," he says, writing Maine's name at the top of the slate, "so how about you practice with this?"

He hands me a slate pencil and a cloth, then leaves the room. I see him off with a huge wave and a brilliant smile, clutching the slate tightly to my chest. As he closes the door behind him, I look down at the slate.

It's probably best to describe it as a kind of mini-blackboard, about the size of an A4 sheet of paper. It's a thin plate of dark stone, surrounded by a simple wooden frame. Both the back and the front can be written on, and on one side, thin lines have been painted to help

you practice writing straight.

The slate pencil is a tool for writing on the slate. It's cool to the touch, hard, and seems to be made out of some kind of stone, but it looks to me like a long, slender piece of chalk. This slightly dirty cloth seems to be what I'll use instead of an eraser.

The letters Otto wrote at the top of the slate have gotten a little smudged, after I held the slate against my shirt a little while ago.

"Whoa, my heart's racing!"

I set the slate on top of the desk, and pick up the chalk. As soon as I grip it like I would a pencil, my heart starts pounding in my ears.

First, I try copying the completely unfamiliar letters that Otto wrote at the top for me. The mental strain of writing these new characters for the first time is almost too much, and my writing is wobbly and distorted. If this were Japan, the teacher would tut at me and have me start over. However, stopping now to erase the board would be a waste of time, and I'm far too happy right now to finally see *letters* again.

I force myself to take deep, slow breaths, then use the cloth to gently wipe off the left side of the board. I carefully write out another line, and this time it's much better than before.

I write my name, and erase it, and write it, and erase it… When I get tired of that, I switch to writing all of the haiku and tanka poetry I can remember in Japanese, and erase it, and write it, and erase it…

Ahhh, this is bliss. Reading and writing is such a joyous thing.

There may have been a fire going, but a cold draft still crept its way in. As I waited for however many hours it took for my family to come pick me up, playing with the slate for the entire time, my weak constitution caused me to catch a cold embarrassingly quickly, and my fever came back.

"Your temperature still hasn't gone down, so stay in bed," admonishes Tory. "Don't get up again!"
"…Fine."

My parents are rushing in and out of the house, carrying in loads of vegetables and cramming them into the winter preparation room. In the kitchen, Tory has been boiling down the fruits that she collected from the forest and making jam. For the first time since coming to this world, I'm smelling sweet things, and the way it permeates the house makes me a little bit happier.

In the midst of stocking up on alcohol and bringing in pig meat, Tory had come in to bring me some soup for lunch. I had put my slate to the side, and taken the tray from her.

"I'm sorry, Tory," I say.
"I mean it!"
"Oh? Do you promise not to tell on me?"
"I don't make promises like that!"

That is, she doesn't make promises. What even is a promise, anyway?

While the family clatters about, finalizing the preparations for the coming winter, I'm stuck lazing about in my bed, scribbling on the slate that Otto gave me. I practice writing my name, writing whatever sentences in Japanese that come to mind, and so on.

I really do want a book that I can record things in permanently. If I'm this happy from just being able to write, I'll be even happier if I'm able to read book!

I have to get better soon, so that I can work on making my paper.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Content advisory: somewhat graphic slaughtering of livestock.
2. Yes, seriously, people will show up at fish markets to watch fish be cleaned. It's a tourist attraction.

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012Defeated by Ancient Egypt

About when I wasn't sure whether we were done or not with our preparations, winter flitted into the streets, and real, honest snow began to fall. During the winter, the entire neighborhood is locked in by the snow, so we're typically confined in our houses except on unusually clear days.

For me, if I have books to read, I can let myself be shut away forever, so whiling away the long winter months would be no trouble at all. I, however, don't have a single book. Will I be able to manage this long kind of isolation without them?

As the snow kept falling, it frequently turned into a full-blown snowstorm, forcing us to keep the doors and shutters tightly closed, with thick clothes stuffed into the crevices to try to shield us from the drafts just a little more.

"…Uuuugh, it's dark," I whine.
"We're in a snowstorm," says Tory, "there's nothing we can do about that."

The only sources of light in this locked-down apartment are a handful of candles and our stove. It may be daytime, but with our windows sealed so tightly not a single ray of sunlight can get in. This is my first time being in such a gloomy room without a single electric light to brighten it. Even when a hurricane knocked out my power, I had flashlights and the light on my cell phone for illumination, and they got my power restored very quickly. Trapped inside a gloomy room such as this, will I have no choice but to become gloomy myself?

"Hey, Mommy, is everyone's house dark like this?" I ask.
"Hmm," she says, "If someone has a little money, they can have quite a few lamps lighting up their homes. We only have one, though."
"Oh? Let's light ours, then!"

My mother sighs and shakes her head at me as I try to insist that lighting equipment is meant to be used. "We want to be careful with our oil, so we should avoid using it whenever we can. If it stays this cold and if the winter drags on, we'll run out of candles eventually, and that would be a big problem, you know?"

There's no counterargument to the way she talks about frugality. Come to think of it, my own mother in Japan was always talking about scrimping and saving and coming up with elaborate ways to spend as little as possible. To save electricity, she'd unplug the TV when it wasn't in use, although she'd then fall asleep with it on all the time. She'd brush her teeth the barest minimum of water to save on the water bill, yet she'd leave the faucet running constantly while washing the dishes… I wonder what she would do to lighten up this room, if she were in this situation.

"Maine, what are you doing?" asks my mother.
"I wonder if this will make the room just a little bit brighter…"

I've grabbed one of my father's old metal gauntlets from his old wartime days, polished

them up a bit, and placed it next to a candle, trying to use its metal surface like a mirror to maybe make it seem a little brighter.

"Maine, stop that," says my father.
"I can't see what I'm doing," says Tory.

Two people rejected me at the same time! Unfortunately, these gauntlets aren't straight pieces of metal, and you can't really say that they're anywhere close to being shiny. They caught the flickering candlelight with a strange, irregular reflection, glimmering harshly in our eyes and making it even more difficult to see what we were doing.

"Ahh, it didn't work… I wonder if there's anything else I can use as a *"mirror"*…"
"Please don't do unnecessary things," says my mother.

After being quite clearly asked to stop, I give up on my plans to brighten the room using reflections. It's not like I'm trying to read right now, but I still sigh, lamenting the poor visibility, and go huddle by the warmth of the stove.

Soon after, my mother starts assembling a loom for weaving fabric. This isn't like one of the enormous, mechanical weaver's looms I saw back in Japan. This is much more primitive. I had been wondering how she was planning on weaving cloth in this tiny room, but it looks like we do have something that's just the right size.

"Tory, your baptism is coming up, so make sure you pay attention to this," says my mother as she carefully instructs Tory on how to work the loom. Tory, with a serious expression on her face, picks up a spool of thread.

"First, put the spool of thread here, then we prepare the warp. Run the thread straight through, like this…"

Making clothing starts by first weaving cloth out of the thread that our mother dyed during the autumn. You weave the cloth, then you sew the clothing, then you embroider it. Next year, we're going to spin the thread too out of wool that we'll buy during the spring. The only thing that we actually purchased in this entire process was the raw materials. It doesn't look like you can just buy new clothing at a store, and fabric doesn't seem to be the kind of thing that commoners can afford.

"That's right, just like that. You're a fast learner, Tory! Maine, do you want to try? If you don't learn how to sew, you'll never be called beautiful, you know?"
"Huh? Beautiful?"
"That's right! When it comes to making clothing for your family, it's important that they either look good to others or are very practical, you know? If you want to be beautiful, you need to know how to cook and sew."

Ahhh, then I shall never be beautiful. …Wait, those conditions sound about right for being a good wife, but they've got nothing to do with being beautiful, right?

In my mind, clothing is something you buy in a store. When you go to the mall, each shop is

overflowing with clothing of all sorts of styles and all sorts of designs. I never really showed much interest in clothing and picked outfits that would be good in more-or-less any situation, but even still my closet was full of choices. I didn't really have more than two or three items that were either mended or hand-me-downs.

Sewing is something that I learned in Home Economics in school, but even then I used an electric sewing machine to do it. The only time I used a needle and thread was when I needed to sew on a button. To be perfectly frank, if it's a woman's job during the winter to spin thread, weave cloth, and sew clothing for her entire family, that's going to be terrible. I have literally zero interest in doing any of that.

Oh, although, if I could maybe use cloth as a substitute for parchment, I'd weave as much as I needed.

"Maine, don't you want to try?" asks Tory, from beside the loom.
"No, maybe next time."

She may have been at the loom, but I don't think she wants to become a weaver. Tory seems to be more interested in becoming a seamstress's apprentice, so she wants our mother to teach her how to do needlework. I, however, am very small, so my hands aren't big enough, and, above all, I want nothing to do with any of that, so trying to teach me is entirely pointless.

"Okay, Mom, I'm going to go work on weaving baskets. Make me some good clothes!"
"Of course, leave it to me. They'll be the most stunning clothes you've ever seen."

My mother, confident in her abilities as a seamstress, works with enthusiasm. Every season, all of the children who recently turned seven years old gather at the church for their baptism ceremonies, wearing their nicest clothes. It's the perfect opportunity for a mother to display their skill in preparing the perfect outfit for their child. Perhaps she's thinking of this as some sort of public presentation?

Smiling to herself, she selects a new thread to use as the warp, one that's much thinner than the one Tory had been practicing with.

"This really is a fine thread," she says, smiling wryly as she thinks about how much time it will take to weave it into cloth. "Tory's baptism is in the summer, so she'll be too hot if I use too thick of a fabric, right?"
"It's still winter, though," I say, "Won't Tory have gotten bigger by summertime?"

In the summer, food is more plentiful and children tend to be healthier and move around a lot more, which I think helps them grow up faster. At least, that's what all of my measurements showed when I was growing up. If these clothes are made to fit now, then they'll be too small by summertime.

"That's true, but I'll be able to make adjustments so they'll still fit just fine. What I'm more worried about is how small you are compared to your sister! I don't know if Tory's hand-me-downs will fit you for next year. I wonder what we're going to have to do then?"

That is definitely something to worry about. Good luck, Mother.

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, my mother had selected a slender thread that seemed a little more sturdy than one made of wool and started weaving, and Tory has already started working on weaving the baskets she hopes to sell in the springtime. My eyes are starting to adjust, just a little bit, to how gloomy this room is, so it's time for me to take the first step towards my ambitions and start working on making my pseudo-papyrus.

By weaving these grass fibers together, I'm definitely going to be able to make something kind of like a paper. I will never be outdone by the people of ancient Egypt! This is my battle to win!!

I lay out my fibers on top of the table. Back in Japan, I once wove a square coaster in a basket-weaving class. If I use that method, then making a postcard-size sheet will be the first step of my victory. I take my fibers, which are even thinner than the thread my mother's using in her weaving, and start weaving them together into rows and columns, tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

I may lack money, technology, and experience, but I shall fight on with my determination, my determination, and my determination!

Whoa, these are too tiny, I'm really straining my eyes. Ah! I messed up!

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…
Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

These fibers are so slender that it's not easy for me to undo any mistakes I make. I have to rip apart huge chunks of it. As I wrestle with these tiny fibers with gritted teeth, Tory puts her basket weaving aside and comes over to take a peek at what I'm doing.

"Hey, Maine," she says, "whatcha doing?"
"Hm? I'm making *'pseudo-papyrus'*."

Tory takes another look at my handiwork, then tilts her head to the side with a puzzled look. It's clear by the expression on her face that she didn't understand anything I just said, nor can she figure out what it is I'm trying to do.

Yeah, it would be hard to figure out just from watching, huh? I haven't even managed to get one square centimeter together, so even I wouldn't be able to tell that this was going to turn into a pseudo-papyrus.

My mother glances over while she weaves her cloth, frowning at the tiny little motions I'm making with my fingers as I'm making my pseudo-papyrus.

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…
Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

"Maine," she scolds, "if you have time to play around, go help Tory with her basket-

weaving."
"Okay. When I've got some free time, I'll go help her, so please don't raise your voice."

I'm absolutely not playing around here, so I absolutely don't have any free time. In fact, this is the busiest I've ever been ever since I was reborn as Maine.

Ah! Another mistake! This is my mother's fault for raising her voice at me. Aaarrrrgh!

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…
Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

"Maine, really, what are you doing?" asks Tory.
"I just said, I'm making *'pseudo-papyrus'*!"

I don't have enough patience left to answer her nicely, so my response comes out a little bit curt as I put all of my attention into weaving things tightly tightly tightly tightly… It's not like I hate doing such fine work, and I'm doing something I actually want to do. I've got no choice but to persevere and keep powering through this.

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…
Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

"Hey, Maine," says Tory. "That's not going to be very big when you're done, you know?"
"I know!!" I snap.

I wasn't really intending to lash out like that, but Tory's observation hit a real sore spot and caused the words to fly out of my mouth before I could think about them. It's already been almost a day, but it's only about as big as my fingertip. I'm very aware of this fact.

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…
Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

The next day, I sit myself back down in front of my fibers, reminding myself of my determination, my *determination*. I'm absolutely not going to let Tory get under my skin today.

"Hey," she says, "what happened to that?"
"….."

I'm not going to let her bug me. I'm not going to let her bug me. What?! It got all loose! Grr! I must still press on, even like this, even if my heart is breaking as I'm forced to make my repairs!

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…
Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

"Hey, Maine—"
"Argh!" I yell, clenching my disintegrating pseudo-papyrus in my fist. "This is impossible! I

can’t do it! I’ve lost to this *'pseudo-papyrus’*!”

I’m discouraged to the point where I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to make this into even a postcard-sized sheet. I need to use extremely fine fibers if I want to make something that’s dense enough to use as paper, but it is going to take such a ridiculously long time to make even a postcard-sized sheet. I don’t think that there’s any way I’ll ever be able to prepare enough papyrus to make a single book.

Trying to make this postcard-sized papyrus also let me get a feel how the poorly final product would have turned out. The center of the sheet would have been tightly woven, but it would get looser and looser the closer you got to the edges, until it was full of tiny holes. There was no way I’d be able to actually write anything on the entire page.

“UuuuUUUUUUuuuuugh… I failed… my papyrus plan failed…”

Whether it’s the gathering of raw materials, the difficulty of making it, or the raw time I’d need to spend per-sheet, there’s no way I’d be able to mass-produce any of this. Even if I were to figure out how to make a perfect sheet, I couldn’t make a book out of it.

“Be quiet, Maine!” says my mother. “Stop playing with that grass and go make some baskets!”
“You can’t make books out of baskets…”
“I don’t have any idea what you’ve been talking about, but you failed, didn’t you? That’s enough of that, work on the baskets!”

My mother’s getting a little angry, so I’ll go work on the baskets. After all that time weaving the tiny fibers together for my pseudo-papyrus, basket-weaving will be much simpler.

“Tory, Mommy… told me to come help you. Gimme some materials.”
“Sure,” she says, smiling. “Let me show you how to do it.”

With a rustle, she gathers up some materials to hand to me. As I take them, I shake my head distinctly.

“No thanks, I already know how.”
“Huh?”

Tory blinks, curiously, at me. I put her out of my sight and get to work. The grain of the wood is long and straight, like bamboo. I carefully join everything together, tightly enough that no gaps will be able to form. My plan is to make something like a simple tote bag. I pour all of my efforts into my craft, still fuming about the failure of my pseudo-papyrus. Once I finish tightly weaving the bottom panel, I take a moment to calculate how I’m going to pattern the sides of the bag before I start weaving. I design handles into it as well so that it will be easy to carry without hurting yourself.

Where it would have taken me more than five days to finish a postcard-sized sheet of papyrus, it took me just one to make a tote bag. For something made by an unskilled child, it actually looks pretty decent.

“Amazing, Maine!” says my mother. “I didn’t know you were so talented at this. Perhaps you should be a craftswoman’s apprentice in the future, hm?”
“Eh? That’s, um…”

My mother’s eyes are twinkling with pleasure to see her basically good-for-nothing child display this sort of talent (?). I don’t, however, have any plans to become a craftswoman. I have already decided that I am either going to be a librarian or work at a bookstore. Libraries and bookstores don’t really exist in a world without books, though, so those jobs don’t really exist either, but that’s just one small problem.

“Ooooh,” whines Tory, “Maine, how are you so good at this?”

Tory compares the basket she made with the one that I did, a dejected look on her face as she sees the difference in quality.

“Tory,” I say, “don’t worry. If you weave it really tightly and use a pattern like this one, it’ll turn out okay!”

Because, really, the difference here is actually a difference of experience. I used to take the advertising inserts out of newspapers, roll them up, and use them as raw materials to make little junk-art boxes in my spare time. I never would have thought that it would ever come in handy, though.

“Ooooooh… why’s Maine better than meeee…”

Uh oh. I’ve made a mess of her pride as an older sister. Even though it’s much easier for me if Tory treats me like her protege than her rival, I still messed it up.

“Um, uhhhh… oh!! Old lady Gerda taught me how to do it when I was left at her place. I’m always doing it over there when you’re in the forest, so I guess I’m getting pretty good. But when I’m making baskets, you’re doing other things, so you’re good at a lot of things that I’m not, right?”

I have never had to cheer up a crying child before, so I’m in a little bit of a panic right now. I’m trying very hard to explain things to her, hoping to cheer her up myself, but, honestly, I don’t really even know what I’m talking about.

“…I guess you’re right.”

I don’t know how much of that story she’s bought, but she cheered up a little bit when I reminded her that there’s things she’s better at than I am.

“Right!” she says, “I’m going to make a lot of them this winter, and I’m going to get better than you!”
“Okay! Do your best, Tory!”

I breathe a sigh of relief now that Tory’s mood has swung back around. Living like this is hard enough already, and doing so without Tory’s help would be even worse. If she always

just told me to do it myself, I'd be in serious trouble. I am *very* glad that I got her to cheer back up.

"Ah, Tory! If you just pull a little bit harder here, you can straighten things out and make it look a lot neater."

I may be good at basket weaving, but I'm still so empty inside. All I really want is a book.

I'm sitting next to Tory as she weaves her basket and explaining some of the tricks. I keep staring at my failed pseudo-papyrus, though. Papyrus isn't going to work, so what is my next step going to be? Through the winter, as I help Tory make baskets, I contemplate my future options.

Egypt has failed me. The difficulty level is far too high for a child like me.

If Egypt is no good, then what's my next idea? *Mesopotamia!*

Inventors of cuneiform! Bakers of clay tablets! Three cheers for Mesopotamian civilization!

Sure, they were ravaged by war and by fire, but their clay tablets survived. I'll make clay tablets, carve my writing into them, and bake them in the stove. This can work! Plus, since I'll be kneading clay to form it into these tablets, I can easily pass it off to the adults as just a child playing with clay.

I've decided! Come springtime, when the snow melts, I'll make clay tablets!!

013Interlude: My Savior

My name is Lutz. I'm five years old. I'm the youngest out of the four kids in my family. My older brothers are Zasha, Zeke, and Ralph.

I woke up this morning to a few faint rays of sunlight flickering through the cracks in our shutters. After days of a raging snowstorm, the sunlight is amazing in a big way.

It cleared up!!

Not caring at all about how cold the bedroom would get, I spontaneously throw open the shutters so I can look outside. The sky is a stunning blue, completely empty of clouds, and the reflection of the sunlight across the snowdrifts make the entire city sparkle.

"Whoaaaa…"

Clear days like this are extremely rare, so when they happen both the adults and children immediately head out to the forest. Missing the rush is really bad. I close the window and hurry to the kitchen.

"Lutz, hurry up!" says Ralph.
"Okay!"

Ralph has already finished eating, and is now clattering around trying to get ready. I warm up some hard rye bread[1] and eat it while dipping it in milk. As soon as I finish, I run to get dressed. Today is a perfect day for foraging. In order to harvest paru, which can only be found during the winter, everyone in the city rushes out to the forest on clear days like this. If you want to get enough for yourself, you absolutely can't be last to arrive. Throughout the year, there aren't very many opportunities to taste something so sweet, so everyone's absolutely hoping they can get any, whether it's a lot or even just one.

Today, I'm not just going with Ralph. Our older brothers Zasha and Zeke, who usually are working at their apprenticeships, are coming with us today. With four of us foraging, we're definitely going to find a lot. The four of us strap boxes and bags to our backs and take off running. We dash down the stairs and out of the house. Our mother's already outside at the water well, and she waves at us as we run past.

"You're heading to the forest now? Be careful, don't overdo it!"
"Got it!"
"Hurry!!"

My mother is, as usual, gossiping with the neighbors by the well. It's really admirable how she's still able to hold these long conversations, even in the middle of this frigid winter. One of the women chatting around the well is Maine and Tory's mother. Both of our mothers are really good friends, so us kids were also always really close to each other.

"Tory and her father have already gone, you know?" she says. "Maybe if you hurry you can

catch up?”

She didn’t mention Maine’s name. Probably, Maine is helping to watch the house. On days like this, she usually stays in bed instead of coming outside. Now that I think about it, she collapsed in the cart on pig-slaughtering day, just like last year. Last year, they brought her along even though she had a fever, but this year she’d seemed pretty healthy. She missed out on fresh sausage two years in a row now… I feel bad for her.

Maine’s so tiny, frail, cute, and unreliable that I think of her like a little sister even though we’re the same age. That reminds me, she had a weird request for some grass stalks while we were preparing for the winter. I wonder what that was about?

“Zeke! Check that tree!” says Zasha.
“On it!”

By the time we arrive at the forest, the paru hunt has already begun. Deep in the snow-bound forest lies a sweet flavor that can’t be harvested except on extremely clear days. The eyes of every single person here are filled with a strange zeal.

Zeke runs towards the tree Zasha points him towards and starts to clamber up it. The rest of us start working to build a fire a little ways away from the tree. We shovel the snow away from a patch of ground, then ignite the firewood we brought with us. I glance over and see that Zeke has decided on the fruit he wants to harvest.

“Lutz, get ready to start climbing,” says Zeke.
“Okay!”

I climb up the paru tree to the fruit that Zeke’s picked out. Paru trees are magical. It’s so white that it looks like it’s made out of ice and snow. It has many branches, so it’s easy to climb, but the fruits it produces are very close to the top. If this were a normal tree, I’d use a knife to cut the fruit free, but you can’t use knives to harvest paru fruit. This is the most dangerous part.

“Lutz, you ready?” asks Zeke.
“One moment,” I reply.

I shift over until I’m right behind him, then quickly pull off my gloves. I grab tightly onto the long, slender branch that holds the fruit that Zeke’s been working on.

“Ahhh, that’s freezing,” says Zeke. “It’s up to you now. I think it’s almost done, though.”
“Yeah, okay!” I say.

Zeke lets go and climbs down the tree. The stem that I’m gripping onto is freezing cold, just like ice, and the air itself is frigid. In an instant, all the heat in my hands starts to drain away.

Fall quickly!

In order to pick a paru fruit, you have to heat up the branch that it’s connected to until it

goes soft and limp. However, you absolutely can't use fire under the tree, because the tree's magic immediately puts it out. So, you have to use the heat from your hands in order to warm it up. Bit by bit, the branch I'm holding onto starts to grow limp. The fruit, however, still hasn't fallen.

Still not done yet? How long is "almost done", Zeke?

I start to lose feeling in my hands, a painful numbness prickling through them. Right when the thought that I should switch out crosses my mind, the branch I'm sitting on suddenly bends a little bit.

"Hey, Lutz, let's switch," says Zasha, from behind me.
"It just needs a little bit more," I tell him. "Hey, Ralph! It's about to fall!"

As soon as Zasha grabs hold of the branch, the fruit pops off with a wet noise and starts to fall. Zasha's hands are far warmer than mine are after having held onto the branch for so long. The fruit, about the size of my face, falls straight down to the ground below.

"Go warm up quickly. Your hands are briiight red!"
"Yeah," I reply.

Zasha starts looking for the next fruit and moves to a different branch. I immediately put my gloves back on, then climb back down the tree, being extra careful not to fall. I run over to the fire immediately, throw off my gloves, and hold my hands above the brilliantly burning fire to warm them up. As I rub my hands together over and over by the fire, feeling slowly prickles back into my hands.

"I'm gonna throw it! …Rrragh!!"

Ralph has found the fallen fruit and is brandishing it triumphantly. With a huge swing, he throws it towards Zeke, then starts climbing up the tree to go relieve Zasha. Zeke picks up the fruit and puts it in a basket. Paru fruit are like huge clumps of ice when they're out in the cold, so you can be as rough with them as you want.

"Whoa, cold…, Zeke, switch with me."
"Roger!"

Zasha has been warming his hands by the fire, but now it's Zeke's turn to throw off his gloves and rub his hands together in the fire's warmth while Zasha goes back to the tree. Harvesting paru is a job that requires a lot of teamwork: the more people you have with warm hands, the better luck you'll have.

Alternating back and forth like this, we gather five fruits.

"It's getting pretty limp," says Zeke as I switch out with him.
"Got it."

Our sixth fruit was just about to fall when the afternoon sun started to shine into the forest

from high above. The leaves of the paru tree sparkle brilliantly in the light, and the tree starts to rustle despite the lack of wind, as if it had a will of its own.

"Oh no! Get down quick, Lutz!"

The instant I heard my brothers call out, the branch beneath me starts to violently shake. I had been leaning forward just a bit to grab onto another branch, so I lose my footing entirely as the branch bucks under me. With one hand, I cling desperately to the branch I had been holding onto, dangling in mid-air.

"Whoa!!"

I reach up with my other hand and grab tightly onto the branch, trying to stop myself from falling.

"No, don't, Lutz! Let go! Get down from there now!"

As soon as I started to let go, the branch suddenly went limp, warmed by the heat from both my hands. With a crack, it snaps off. The paru fruit and I plummet towards the ground.

"WAAAAaaaaa-"

The ground beneath the tree is covered in deep, deep snow, and since I was falling feet first after having been dangling from the tree, I land without any serious injury. Around us, other people are jumping out of the other paru trees scattered here and there.

The time for gathering is over.

The trees shine brilliantly in the light, their countless leaves rustling loudly. They stretch skyward, growing taller as if they're chasing after the light. Soon, they tower over even the thickest, fullest trees in the forest. Despite there still not being any wind, their branches whip through the air, almost like a woman's long hair swirls around her as she shakes her head. The unpicked paru fruit fly off in all directions as their branches flick about in the shimmering light.

As soon as the fruit all fly off, the paru trees start shrinking as if they're melting away, and soon vanish into nothingness. Unlike any other tree in the forest, these are magic trees, which can only be found on clear days in the middle of the winter.

"It's over."
"Let's go home."

Everyone gathers up their bags full of paru fruit and heads for home. Every household is going to spend the whole afternoon working on processing the fruit that they gathered. It's hard, heavy work, but it's still kind of fun.

"First off, let's split these up."

Now that it's in the house, the fruit that was about the size of my face has gotten a little smaller and rounder now that its rind is melting away.

"Can you handle getting the bowl ready?"
"Yeah!"

We light the tip of a small stick on fire using the stove, then press it into the shell of the paru fruit. With a sharp crack, the skin just in that area splits open a little bit, and a milky white juice starts welling up through it. An amazingly sweet smell drifts out to fill the house, and I gulp as my mouth starts to water. So that we don't lose a single drop of the juice, we've placed the fruit in a bowl.

This juice, and its sweet, sweet flavor, is extremely precious. I want to do nothing more than drink it all down in one go, but I've decided that I'm going to pace myself very, very carefully. For now, all I can do is swallow my saliva as my mouth keeps watering.

Once we've drained out all the juice from inside, the next step is to crush the fruit and extract all the oil from it. Paru oil can be used both for cooking and for fueling lamps, which makes these fruits extremely welcome in the middle of the winter. Once we've pressed all of the oil out, the remains of the fruit are very dry. Once they finish drying, they're not really suitable for people to eat, but it makes for an excellent, nutritious feed for our chickens. Even better, it causes the flavor of the eggs to change a lot, which I'm also always happy for.

"May we come in?"
"Sorry to bother you…"

For a couple of days after that, we've had people constantly coming by, hoping to trade the dried-out fruit remains for eggs from our chickens. From my perspective, I don't know what I'm going to do when we've traded everything away for chicken feed. The chickens will be very happy about this, but all of the eggs that I could have actually eaten are vanishing, right before my eyes.

Please, don't bring us any more chicken feed. Bring me meat! While my older brothers tend to split the eggs evenly among us, they hog all the meat and I barely get any of it.

As I was contemplating my pending starvation, Maine and Tory come in, carrying with them some more fruit scraps. Inside their rough nilen bags are about two fruits' worth of scraps.

"Lutz," says Maine with an enormous smile as she holds out her bag in front of her, "can we trade these for some eggs?"

I really don't want to, but my mother would be furious if I turned them away.

"We kinda already have enough chicken feed… do you maybe have any meat?"
"Meat?"
"My older brothers eat all of it, so I don't really get any for myself."

During the winter, everyone is home nearly all the time, so my food winds up getting stolen

from me a lot and I usually wind up staying hungry. I know that Tory and Maine can't really do anything about it, but I let my frustration slip out anyway.

Tory gives a wry smile. "You're not as strong as your brothers, so course they're gonna steal from you," she jokes, brushing past my dissatisfaction.

Maine, for some entirely unknown reason, shoves the bag right towards my face. "Hey, Lutz, why not eat this?"
"How the hell am I going to eat chicken feed?!"

I am completely blindsided by the fact that Maine, who I always treat so nicely, just suddenly told me to eat chicken feed. The sheer shock of it caused me to reflexively yell out, but Maine just stands there with a blank look on her face, head tilted to one side.

"…I guess it depends on how you cook it?"
"Huh?"
"The fruit's been squeezed totally dry, so you can't eat it. It's probably still tasty, though, so even these dried-out bits will be fine to eat if we just cook them right."

Maine is saying these completely unbelievable things with a perfectly straight face. I instinctively glance over at Tory to see what her reaction is. There can't be *anyone* who'd eat chicken feed. Tory, however, gives me a tired, worn-out smile and shrugs her shoulders a little bit. For some reason, Maine really does seem to want to eat paru fruit.

"You…! Do you know how wasteful it is to *eat* a paru?! You don't just eat it, you squeeze out its juice and its oil and then give the rest to the chickens!! There's no way that we're just going to waste it by *eating* it!"

I don't think there's a single person in this house that lacks enough propriety that they'd turn to eating bird food. On top of that, taking something that we worked so hard to get and just eating it without making full use of it is unbelievable! I don't think there's a single person in this entire city who'd think of that except for Maine.

"Ummm… if you were going to give it to the chickens that would be okay, but you just said you have enough bird food, right? It'll be okay to use this to fill us up instead, then."
"Like I'm *trying* to say, people can't eat something that's so dried out!"
"It only turned into something people can't eat after all of the juice and oil was squeezed out of it. If we put some effort into it, we can definitely make it edible again!"
"Maine, umm…"

My strength leaves me. Maine is saying such unbelievable things with such an earnestly smiling face! What's this feeling? I feel like I'm not going to convince her no matter what I try to say. Is this helpless sort of feeling what they call a sense of defeat?

"Hey, Lutz," says Tory, quietly. Now would have been the perfect time for her to remind her sister that bird food isn't something that humans can eat, but instead she weakly hangs her head. "It's kinda hard to believe," she says, "but you really can make it edible. …I was even really shocked when I found out how good it was."

Eh? *Seriously?* She made you eat bird food, Tory?!

Somehow, Maine has already demonstrated this working in her own home. I see now, I guess I'm just arguing off of my own self-confidence, huh.

"Let's try it out real quick, okay? Lutz, do you have any paru juice left over?"

As she talks, she puts some of the dried-out remains in a little bowl. She adds about two teaspoons' worth of my share of the fruit juice, then blends it all together. She scoops some up onto her finger and sticks it into her mouth, then nods to herself in satisfaction.

"Open wide, Lutz!"

Not only is my precious fruit juice being used for this, but I'm about to be fed bird food. I think this is probably going to be terrible, but after seeing Maine taste it as if it were a completely ordinary thing to do, I hesitantly open my mouth. She scoops up a bunch of the yellow stuff onto her fingertip and puts it in my mouth. As I close my mouth again, a sweet flavor radiates through it.

Only a little bit of juice went into this, but it's still so sweet and it doesn't feel dried-out at all. Every year, I stretch out my share of the juice for as long as I can by drinking only just enough for me to taste it, but if I blend it with the leftovers from the squeezing, I guess I could eat a lot more sweet stuff, right?

"It really is sweet, see?" says Maine, chuckling to herself triumphantly. My older brothers, who had been looking on suspiciously from a distance, simultaneously jump in on us.

"It's sweet?"
"It's really sweet?"
"Seriously? Lemme try, Lutz."

All three of them charge forward, fingers outstretched, ready to scoop into the little bowl. I try to run away so that they can't grab onto it, but with such a big difference in physique between us, I can't escape. I can't even dodge!

"Hey, let go! Stop pulling! Are older brothers only good for stealing their younger brother's stuff?"
"My little brother's things are my things!"
"Sweet things should be shared with everyone."
"Ah-HA! Got it!"

I struggle in vain to resist the three of them, but they yank the bowl out of my reach. They take turns scooping the mix out of the bowl with their fingers. "Aaaaa!! My paru!!" I wail, but they completely ignore me. Soon, the bowl is completely empty.

"Whoa, tasty."
"This was bird food, right?"

Just like mine did, all of their eyes go wide with disbelief, and they look over at Maine. She quickly looks to the side, shying away from all of the attention, but then says something even more unbelievable.

"Lutz, since we're at your house, I can make it even better."
"Seriously?!" shout all of us, simultaneously.

It's completely natural for us to react like that. We're all growing boys with healthy appetites, after all. Zasha, in particular, is the oldest, and he's always saying there's never enough food. Even if it is made from bird food, we are all extremely eager to have another tasty thing to eat.

"…Oh, although, I can't do it if you guys don't help. …I'm not very strong."
"Alright, leave it to me!" I reply. It's immediately obvious that Maine is frail and weak. If she needs our help to make us something delicious, I will help with all of my might!

"Lutz, don't hog her attention. Let me help too, Maine, I'm way stronger than Lutz is."
"Yeah, okay!" she says.

Suddenly, all of my brothers want to cooperate. I'm left wondering when it will ever be my turn for anything, but Maine looks absolutely delighted as she starts giving us orders.

"Okay, hmm. You two older brothers get a griddle ready on the stove. Lutz, you do the prep work, Ralph, you're in charge of mixing. Ah, also, it would be really mean for everyone to only use Lutz's juice, so everyone needs to share theirs! Come on, chip in, chip in."

She claps her hands in a very mother-like fashion as she urges my older brothers on. Right now, Maine looks like an angel to me. With a single word, she saved me from having to give up all of my juice by myself.

"Lutz, get me two teaspoons of milk. Ralph, grab that spatula and start stirring this, please."

Even though Maine is usually a huge hindrance, right now she's looking extremely lively as she fires off instruction after instruction while everyone is moving around her. Zasha and Zeke have dragged the griddle on top of the stove and are working on getting it fired up. Ralph, spatula in hand, is vigorously mixing things together as Maine adds them into the bowl. I'm running here and there on Maine's instructions, picking up the various things she says we need.

"Right, this is looking good. Next, do you have any butter?"

I run and get it for her. She uses a small spoon to take off a chunk of it, then climbs up on a chair next to the stove and slides it onto the griddle. Every one of our hearts skip a beat when they see what a precarious position she's in, but she doesn't seem to notice at all.

The butter on the griddle sizzles loudly as it shrinks away. A delicious scent fills the room, and I'm suddenly acutely aware of how hungry I've been getting. Maine reaches into the bowl Ralph's been stirring with a larger spoon, and drops a spoonful of thick, muddy batter

on top of the melted butter. As the batter hisses over the fire, the sweet scent of paru mingles with the savoriness of the butter, and I'm almost overwhelmed. What she's making looks kind of like the potato pancakes my mother makes, but the scent is totally different.

"Alright, its your turns, make them like that, please," she says.

After demonstrating how to make one, she passes off the cooking duties to my older brothers, who do not need a chair to reach the stove. Maine, from atop her chair, continues to give directions. That's fine, though. We understood what we had to do as soon as she showed us, and making her wobble on top of such a tall chair would be too much for us to do. Since it's way less dangerous for us to do the cooking, my older brothers immediately take her spoon and get to work.

"When the bubbles start to rise like that, that side's done. Start flipping them over, please!"
"Got it!" says Zasha.

At Maine's direction, he scoops them up with a spatula, one by one, and neatly flips them over, showing that the underside is now a wonderfully cooked brown. They look so good that I almost start drooling.

"Alright, take them off, put them over there, and start more cooking in their place."

We gather up the finished things and put them to the side, then drop more butter and batter onto the pan. Whenever Maine said they were ready, we flipped them over and moved them to the plates.

Maine holds the first plate we finished with triumphantly, a huge smile on her face. "Voila! *'Simple bean curd hotcakes!'*"[2]

I actually have no idea what she just said. I don't really know how I'm supposed to react, so I tilt my head to the side.

"…Huh? What did you say?"
"Um…," she says, blinking in surprise. Her face scrunches up for a moment, as if she's searching for the right words. "The basic parucakes are ready!"[3]

Steam wafts up from the plates of parucakes lined up along the table. I want to dig into them immediately.

"They're hot, so be careful! Please, enjoy your meal~!"

Slowly, I take a bite. Shockingly, they're even more delicious than I thought they were going to be. They're light and fluffy, and don't have even a trace of the dryness of bird food. Unlike potato pancakes, these are extremely sweet, even without adding any jam.

On top of that, since they're stacked on each person's dish one at a time, I don't have to worry about my brothers taking them all!

“Hey, Lutz. If you make these, do you think you’ll be able to fill yourself up easily?”
“I do! Wow, Maine, you’re amazing.”

Since people keep coming over wanting to trade for eggs, we have a lot of paru leftovers. Our chickens make plenty of eggs for us, and if we can trade some of those for milk, then we should be able to have parucakes all through the winter.

“I’ve got some other ideas about how to cook the squeezed-out paru,” says Maine, “but I don’t have the strength to do them myself.”
“If you show us how to do it, we’ll make it for you!”

After that, Maine continued to come over and imprint on us new ways to cook delicious things every time the weather cleared up and we went to collect more paru. Thanks to Maine teaching us how to cook, I rarely went hungry that winter.

Maine is my savior, but she’s also very weak, so I want to help her any way I can.

I couldn’t have noticed at the time, I was so immersed in the joy of parucakes, but this would become a huge influence in my life.

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. Everything has fantasy names in this series (like “nilen” being the stand-in for “linen”), so it’s not literally “rye bread”. However, the word used here is 黒パン *(lit. “black bread”), which refers to rye bread without actually calling it rye. If we ever learn the in-universe name for rye, I’ll update this.*
2. Specifically, the bean curd she’s referring to is okara, which is what’s left of a soybean after you make soy milk or tofu. It’s frequently used as animal feed, but is used in a lot of East Asian cuisine. It’s dry and tasteless ordinarily, but you can make it into porridge or add it to baked goods.
3. She swapped out the n in pancake パンケーキ *for a ru* パルケーキ*.*

014Otto's Assistant

It seems that, in this town, whenever the weather clears up during the winter everyone always goes out to pick paru. Last time this happened, my father had a day off from work, so he went to go pick paru with Tory, but today he's busy with his job. As I started wondering if that meant that we were going to give up on paru after all, I noticed my mother gathering up her coat.

"I'm going to be going with Tory today," she says.

Paru are valuable winter fruit, To my eye, they're a fruit that contains a syrupy coconut milk, olive oil, and a sweet-ish sort of bean curd. Since I figured out that the remains of the fruit after all of the oil has been squeezed out can be used as a good substitute for bean curd, I've been able to expand the house's menu a little bit. Thanks to that, it looks like my mother's been increasingly motivated lately.

The bean curd hotcakes I made the other day at Lutz's house were the first sweets I've had in ages. Lutz's family raises chickens in their house, so they have a lot of eggs for trade, which means they have access to a ready supply of milk. I'm envious. Between the abundance of ingredients and the extra manpower that all the boys provide, it's way easier to cook at Lutz's house. The bean curd hotcakes… ah, I called them parucakes, didn't I? The parucakes left everyone deeply moved, and I was able to use paru oil, egg yolk, and a pinch of salt to make mayonnaise. With that and some more salt for seasoning, I was able to make something kind of like a potato salad, which also quickly became very popular.

…It looks like my reincarnation has made Lutz's and his brother's lives better, at least.

There's so many ways to use a paru that I want to get as many of them here in my house as I can. Unfortunately, I'm absolutely useless on any sort of trip, but I still want to cheer everyone on if I can.

Tory, fight! Fight! Mother, win! Win!!

However, when Tory and my mother head for the forest, there's still the problem of what to do with me. In any case, I have no strength, I'm sickly, and I'm worse than useless. There's literally zero way that I can make a trip into the forest in the dead of winter. To make things worse, they seem to think that I might get up to some sort of trouble if they leave my at home by myself, so it seems they absolutely can't leave me to watch the house.

Isn't that kind of mean?

My father eats his breakfast, pondering deeply, as he gets ready for work. Suddenly, he claps his hands together.

"I've got it! Maine, how about you come with me to the gates today?"

I'd go with my father to the gate. Tory and my mother would go to the forest to gather paru. Then, on their way back, they'd pick me up from the gate. If they do that, the two of

them can go pick fruit without worrying about me, and I won't be left home alone.

"Ah, that's a good idea," says my mother. "Let's do that! Tory, let's head out. We'll leave Maine with your father today."
"Okay!" says Tory. "Maine, we'll come by and pick you up later."

As my mother praises my father for his good idea, she gathers up everything she needs in the blink of an eye and leads Tory out of the house. Paru gathering seems to be something that only happens before noon, so it's critical that everyone gets there as soon as possible. This is probably because everyone snaps all the fruit up in a heartbeat. It is such a delicious and useful fruit, after all.

"Well then, shall we head to the gates?"

Being baby-sat at the gates, huh… Well, it's a change of pace from being here in the house all the time. If Otto's there, then I can probably get him to teach me some new letters, too…

Frankly, I am starting to get really tired of being inside this house. Ever since I failed at making pseudo-papyrus, I have been reduced to only being able to do one of two things: play with the slate and make baskets. I never could have thought that, without books, I would have so much free time and so little idea of what to do with it.

By the way, lately, I've had "Come, Spring!"[1] and "Radio Calisthenics"[2] playing in my head. Until spring finally comes around, I can't go outside and I can't work on making my clay tablets.

Also, I've started doing radio calisthenics every morning so that I can build up enough strength to start going outside. My family has been looking at me strangely, but I think that it's very important for me to do everything I can to get in better shape. To be painfully honest, my physical condition wasn't something I really paid much attention to back in Japan, so I don't know exactly where I should be starting from in my exercises.

"Oh, Daddy. Is Otto going to be there today?"
"Ahh, I think so?"
"Yay!"

Now I'm actually looking forward to being baby-sat at the gates. I cheerfully go about my own preparations. Since I'm going out, I'll need to bring my slate. I layer on my clothes and pull on my coat, then I slide the slate into the tote bag I wove earlier this winter. With that, I'm ready to go.

"Let's go, Daddy!"
"…Maine, you really like Otto a lot, don't you?"
"Yeah! I love him," I reply.

After all, he gave me this slate to help me learn the alphabet, and he's my teacher (or so I've unilaterally decided). Wouldn't it be impossible for me *not* to like him? Honestly, I probably like him more then I like my father. In the interest of maintaining harmonious human

relations, though, I clamp my mouth closed so that I don't actually say that last bit.

"Cold!" I exclaim, as we step outside.

The air itself is frigid. The faintest of winds is blowing, and that alone is enough to cause a painful chill to cut straight through to my bones. My face is tingling so intensely that, even despite my laziness, I'm thinking that I'm going to have to figure out how to make some kind of moisturizing cream out of some of the paru oil we get today.

On top of that, the snow is so deep that I can barely walk. There's probably some knack to walking on top of snow, but I didn't grow up in a snowy part of the country so I don't know it. After only two steps, my tiny child legs were stuck deep in the snow, and I couldn't move them no matter what I tried. I have no idea what to do next.

"Daaaaddy! How do I walk in this?"

My father turns around, a startled expression on his face, and walks back towards me, his arms out to the sides for balance as his legs sink into the snow. "…It's okay, I got you," he says. He hangs my tote bag from his wrist, then picks me up by my sides, lifts me up high, and deposits me on his shoulders. "Be careful not to fall!"

"Whoa… so high!"

I'm way higher up than I was before, even when Ralph carried me on his shoulders. I don't, however, feel like I'm in any danger of falling. My father, the soldier, has broad, firm shoulders, providing both a sense of stability and a sense of security. He's very different from my other father, who I think was a salaryman in a sales department.

"Hold on as tight as you can, okay?"
"Okaaay!"

It's been a long time since I rode piggyback, so I'm a little bit excited. I cling tightly to my father's head as he starts trudging through the snow. There's a narrow pathway cut through the snow, but it doesn't seem to have been made with a shovel. Instead, it looks like it was made by people carefully following in each other's footsteps, one by one, as they left for the main street.

"Maine, you should know, Otto's already married."

We had been walking in silence for a while when those words suddenly tumbled out of his mouth. He seems to have been considering what to say for a while.

Huh? Did I… say something about wanting to marry him at some point? I know I didn't say anything about wanting to marry my father, though.

"Ummmm… so, what?"
"Well, Otto's the kind of man who doesn't think of anyone but his wife."

What kind of parent uses this kind of diversion on his five-year-old daughter, you idiot? Would it be okay if I played the straight man and smacked him on the head now?

"Okay, but what's wrong?"
"....."

Argh, really?! *Now* you go quiet? You're such a pain! I'm not going to play along, father. Do you really think that I'm going to say something like "but Daddy you're so much more amazing" or "but Daddy I love you so much more" right now?

"Oh," I say, "are you saying that since Otto is the kind of man who loves his wife so much, he's really amazing?"
"...No."

Sulking fiercely, my father continues trudging forward in silence. After some time, we finally arrive at the gate, me still riding atop the shoulders of my troublesome father.

"Good morning, sir," says the soldier stationed at the gate, bowing his head for some strange reason. After a moment, I remember that bowing your head in greeting is one of the social customs here. Then, he bows his head again, maybe for me, perched on top of my father's shoulders.

"Lihit," says my father, "this is my daughter Maine. I'll be leaving her in the night duty room until the afternoon, when her mother comes to get her on her way back from picking paru."
"Understood, sir."
"Maine, go to the night duty room. Otto's in there, so that'll be fine, right?"

Whoaaa, that sounded almost petulant. Huh? Maybe... is my father so jealous of Otto that he's getting childish? Are human relations breaking down here?

"I'm only really looking forward to learning some new letters from him, you know," I say.
"...You don't need Otto for that."

Sorry, Otto. I tried to smooth things over, but I think I might have only made it wose.

At the beginning of this whole mess, I really was only excited about learning new letters, but I have no idea where my father's thoughts have been wandering to.

"I'm coming in," says my father, knocking on the door to the night duty room as he opens it and walks in. The night room is lit by both a brilliantly glowing fire in the fireplace and a lamp shining on a desk. It's way brighter than it is back home. Otto is sitting at a desk close to the fire, filling out paperwork.

"Otto!" I say.
"Corporal... and Maine? Why's she here?"
"She'll be staying here while her mother's gathering paru. Take care of her."

He tersely... no, sharply explains the situation while he lowers me down from his shoulders.

Otto's eyes go wide and he glances back and forth between his pile of paperwork and my father. Clearly, he's been shaken by having being abruptly ordered to be a babysitter.

"Huh? Umm, but, I… need to finish the budget and the financial report…"
"Maine," says my father, completely ignoring Otto's protests, "it's warm in here. Stay here and take care not to catch a cold."
"Yes, Daddy!" I wave goodbye to him as he leaves the room.

I turn towards Otto. "I'm sorry, Otto."
"Huh?"
"You know, I was super happy when you gave me the slate, and I'm even more happy that I get to see you again."
"Oh, that's good. I'm also happy to see you again, but…"

He gives me a bit of an awkward smile, then looks a little confused, as if he's wondering why I needed to apologize for that.

"I was kinda praising you earlier, and my daddy started to sulk."
"…Oh, boy…"
"I'll be really quiet until my mommy comes and picks me up, so could you teach me some new letters?"

From the parchment and ink that's spread out on top of the desk, it's obvious that he was in the middle of working through some paperwork. I don't want to be too much of a hindrance, but I'm not going to let this chance to learn more letters slip away.

"Sure, why not? Since it's you, Maine, I know you'll practice quietly…"

I quickly take out my slate. The slate pencil clacks against the surface as Otto writes out new letters, mumbling to himself. At this point, I've lost count of the many hours I spent playing with it by myself, so by now I feel a strange sense of confidence.

"Maine, if you get another fever, your father's going to be even more upset than he is now, so sit over here."

With a wry smile, he shuffles his things over, giving me his seat in front of the fireplace. I completely agree with his reasoning, so I don't restrain myself too much as I sit myself down.

"Thank you! I can definitely practice here."

These letters seem to be part of an alphabet. It's not a syllabic script like hiragana, or an logographic system like kanji. This feels like an alphabet where both pronunciation and meaning change depending on how you spell things.[3]

For a while, the room was quiet, with only the clacking sound of pencil on slate and the scratching sound of pen on parchment breaking through the stillness.

When I feel like I've memorized the letters in front of me, I look up from my slate. Otto is looking at his parchment, deep in concentration as he works through his calculations. Next to him is some sort of abacus-like calculation device, but I have no idea how to use it. When I was in elementary school, we practiced using an abacus to add and subtract, but I don't know if the same methods apply to this thing.

When it seems that he's come to a break in his calculations, I ask him a question.

"Otto, what's this?"
"I'm working on the financial report and drawing up the budget. We have to come up with a budget for the year during the winter and submit it before spring comes around, but there aren't very many soldiers who are good at math. I'm the one with the most confidence in my ability to keep track of money, so the task of doing the budget and the financial report falls on me."
"They've given you a really difficult job, huh."

When I look over the parchment, I can't really read the words, but there's three columns of numbers lined up next to them. The first two look like price and quantity, and the last one seems to be the multiplied total, I think. Is this an equipment requisition form?

As I ponder, I notice a mistake in the calculations.

"Otto, isn't this wrong?"
"Eh?"
"Here, this is 75 and this is 30, right? So, isn't that 2,250? Ah! This one's wrong too."

I can read the numbers, but I don't actually know how to describe multiplication in this language, so I have to describe things in a roundabout fashion.

"Eh? I thought you couldn't read! How can you do these calculations?"
"Heh heh heh, my mom taught me numbers when we went to the town market! So, I can look at the numbers, and I can do the math, but I can't read any of this part over here."

When I say that I can't read the words next to each entry, Otto starts to ponder something.
"Nah… but maybe…" he mumbles to himself, as he broods.

"…Maine, I *have* to fix this. Could you help me out?"

Is it really okay for me to take over something like this? Not only is this departmental information, and probably a breach of security, but isn't letting a child help you out with something like this really bad? Rather, aren't you really desperate, since you're asking for help for a child, albeit one with surprising math skill?

Not only did he say he *had* to fix it, he's asking for help from a child. This really is abnormal. Since he's putting himself on the line like this, I feel like I want to help him as best as I can.

On top of that, he's got something I really want, and I finally have the bargaining point I was searching for.

“Okay. I’ll help you out, if you give me slate pencils and keep helping me learn the alphabet.”
“Huh?”

His eyes go wide again. He clearly didn’t expect a little girl like me to suddenly thrust conditions like that on him. This was exactly the response I was expecting, so, with a little chuckle, I explain the present situation.

“Like I said, my mom taught me all my numbers. I still don’t know letters, though, so I want you to teach them to me.”
“Teaching you is fine, but… slate pencils? Those aren’t very expensive, you know?”

Just like Otto says, slate pencils are available for sale in the town market. In reality, they’re something that I actually got my mother to buy for me. So, I know they’re pretty easy to go out and buy. However, it’s a lot harder for me, personally, to obtain them.

“My mommy bought some for me a while ago, but she doesn’t really want to buy me any more.”
“Why’s that?”
“It’s probably because I spend so much time playing with the slate. I use them all up as soon as she buys them for me…”
“Ahahahahahaha!”

Since I spend countless hours every day playing with the slate, the pencils wear down to nubs very quickly. Since I don’t get any pocket money for myself, you could say that finding a way to get more slate pencils is a matter of life and death for me.

“A… anyhow!” I say. “My time isn’t so cheap that I’d work for free, you know!”
“…Your time is still really cheap, though,” says Otto, smiling wryly.

Otto has now officially become my writing tutor. It looks like I wasn’t wrong about these being equipment requisition forms, but it looks like he’s in the middle of validating the math on someone else’s paperwork.

“What should I do?” I ask.
“Could you check to see if anything here is wrong? In any event, I don’t know where the errors might be hiding. It’s going to take a while to get through all of this.”

It should be obvious, but there aren’t any computers here, so drawing up these documents takes time, but going through and checking every single calculation in this document is more work than one person alone can handle.

“There’s other soldiers that can do math, huh?”
“…That’s true, but I can do it, and I’ve got a pretty good reason to do it too…”

Somehow, it looks like Otto has some sort of circumstances behind why he became a soldier. I really want some juicy information, so I’m itching to ask him to go into more detail, but there’s a lot of validation work ahead of us to be done. I sit tight, knowing that there will

be plenty of time for gossip when I see him next time.

"Maine, do you want to use the calculator?"
"No thanks, I don't know how to use it, so I'm fine for now. I'll work things out on my slate."

It's way easier for me to do calculations on my erasable slate than it would be to do so on a blank form. I start to work through the numbers by hand, using my slate. Numbers were drilled into my head from such an early age, though, that the first symbol that pops into my head is "9". With some effort, I make sure that I'm properly using the numerals of this world.

"Whoa, this is much easier. I'm moved! You've seriously saved me. I never thought that validating those calculations could go so quickly! If you can do this much math, Maine, you could definitely be a merchant some day. If you do, I can introduce you to the merchant's guild, okay?"

It seems that for several years, Otto has had to compile all of the budgets and make all of the financial reports all by himself. Even though all we did today was checking everything, Otto is still so deeply grateful. If I were to be in a position to make a lot of books, then the best way to turn that into a bookstore would be to join the merchant's guild. I've made an important connection in a really unexpected place. On top of that, I've earned some recognition as Otto's invaluable assistant.

"Maine, if you want to learn how to write, then I'll help you beat them into your skull, okay? If you do that, then you can help me write up all the papers, too."
"Really?! Woohoo!!"
"Huh? That got you excited?"

Otto's eyes may be going wide with shock, but if he's going to seriously teach me the alphabet, then it's only natural that I'd be happy, right? And if I'm helping out with official paperwork, that means I'll get to touch parchment, right? And write letters onto a page with real ink, right? Isn't that such a joyous thing?

"Maine, sorry to keep you waiting."
"Let's go home!"

Today I did more math than I've done in a long while, so it was a great workout for my brain. I'm so mentally fatigued that the inside of my head feels numb. It's a pleasant feeling. This was an incredibly productive day.

"Thanks, Otto! I'm really grateful for your help."
"Yours too, Maine. You saved me a lot of time."
"See you in a bit, Daddy! Good luck with your work!"
"Yep," he says, tersely.

It's been a few hours, but my father is still in a bad mood. Or maybe, did it get even worse?

Why?

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. "Haru yo, Koi" (春よ来い, "Come, Spring!") is a 90s JPop song.
2. Radio calisthenics is basically a nationwide exercise program that's broadcast throughout Japan to help people stay active.
3. "Alphabet", in a proper linguistic sense, refers to something like the English alphabet, where each letter corresponds to a specific phoneme, and multiple letters are strung together to form full syllables. The various forms of Japanese writing aren't actually true alphabets, but are either syllabic scripts where each character represents a full syllable or logographic scripts where each character may have one or more syllables and represents an entire concept.

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015Tory's Hair Ornaments

A few days after I was baby-sat at the gate, my mother finally finished the brand new outfit she'd been working so hard on for Tory. It's essentially a one-piece dress, made from unbleached cloth, with a straight, clean silhouette. The hems of the neckline and sleeves are embroidered with a simple design, and the whole thing is tied together with a wide sash of cool blue cloth, accentuating the outfit.

Cute things are cute, but… it looks a little unsatisfactory to me. In Japan, when kids visit shrines on *Shichi-Go-San*[1], the kimono and dresses that they wear are all very showy and colorful so that they'll look good for their photos. Or, at least, that's the image the photography studios keep feeding us in their ads.

"What do you think, Maine? Isn't it cute?"

If you wanted to, you could make it a little bit more fluttery, or maybe add some more decorations. Either of those things would make it so much cuter…

I may be saying that to myself deep in my heart, but my mother looks so proud of her handiwork and Tory looks so pleased with her new dress that I guess it's already more than good enough. This isn't an outfit that you're going to have a picture taken of for your own self-satisfaction, this is something that's going to be worn to a temple. It's entirely possible that wearing something flashy would be frowned upon. I don't think I should really comment on Tory's clothing right now, since I don't actually know any of the things that are apparently common sense in this world.

I have found one thing I *can* comment on, though: her hair. Regular care may have made it glossy and smooth, but she always wears it in exactly the same way, in a single thick three-part braid behind her. If we were to change up her hairstyle for her baptism ceremony, I wonder what people would think of some tasteful hair ornaments.

However, whatever I do, I can't actually get started until I learn what the customs are here. Maine was a very young child, after all, and she didn't really have any memories of baptism ceremonies at all.

"Tory," I say, "it's really cute! …But, what about your hair? You've got to decide what sort of hairstyle you want for your baptism ceremony."
"I was going to just go like this, though…?"

…Tory, that's not good at all. This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing, put a little more thought into your fashion choices.

Unintentionally, my head drops down in exasperation. I pull myself together and find a new angle to continue my questioning. If Tory's hairstyle isn't going to change, maybe we can add some sort of decoration to it.

"Ummm… so, what about ornaments? Are you going to use any?"

“Oh, hmm… it’s summertime, so maybe I’ll pick some flowers somewhere?”
“Whoa, don’t do that! Your dress is too cute for that!”

She’s just casually talking like she’s going to pick whatever flowers she manages to find lying around! Haven’t you heard of coordinating an outfit?! …Ahh, of course not.

Here, it seems like it’s weird for a child to wear their hair up. It’s okay for it to be braided, though, or to have ornaments in it. If Tory doesn’t have any, it should be okay for me to make them for her. I’d be able to make some sort of lacework, I think. I’ve got plenty of time until summer, so I don’t think I’ll have any problems.

“I’ll do something! Leave it to me, Tory. I’ll definitely make you even cuter.”

Immediately after I made that declaration, I suddenly realize that we don’t have any needles for lacework. My mother has large needles that she uses for knitting, but they’re too large for me to make lace with.

Wh… what should I do?!

My father’s the only one in the family who seems like he’d be able to make things like tools. Tory may have made my hair sticks, but the one who shaved it smooth so it was easy to use, then stained it with oil was actually my father.

I surreptitiously sneak a glance at my father, trying to gauge his mood. It’s already been a few days since I’d gone to the gate and Otto had agreed to help me learn to write, but my father has been in a pretty foul mood ever since. He doesn’t really look like he’s in the mood to be pestered, but I don’t think he’ll get less angry at me if I just leave him alone.

Honestly, my father is being pretty childish, so it’s up to me to be the adult here. If I read between the lines, it’s almost like he wants me to say something. If I fawn on him a little bit and pester him to do something for me, I think I might be able to not only get him to make me some needles, but also cheer him up, killing two birds with one stone.

“Daddy, daddy!” I say.
“What?”
“Daddy, you’re really good at making stuff, right? You’re the one who made Tory’s doll, right?”
“Y… yeah, that’s right.” He clears his throat. “Ahh, what is it, do you want a doll of your own?”

He’s keeping an expression on his face like he’s still angry with me, but there’s a little glimmer of anticipation in his eyes as he glances over at me.

“Nuh-uh,” I say. “I want some knitting needles.”
“Needles? Can’t you use the ones your mother has? I think she’ll lend them to you, right?”

As he answered me, a supremely dejected expression falls over his face. Waves of misery pour off of him, like he’s had enough just wants to smooth things over already.

He waves his hand, shooing me, as if he's telling me to just go away in a manner that's not very becoming of a parent. At the very least, I'm going to make him hear me out.

"I need needles that are way smaller than the ones Mommy has. I want needles that can knit thread, not yarn. …Daddy, these need to be really skinny, and I think making them would be difficult. Can you do it?"

I look up at him with glistening, upturned eyes, hands clasped in front of my chest, in the cutest begging pose I can possibly make. I don't know if the Japanese standards of 2-D cuteness apply in this world, but there's no doting parent in any world that doesn't find their own daughter adorable… so I think this is probably cute enough. Whether it's due to my cuteness or not, my father scratches at his stubbly chin, contemplating.

"Hmm… is wood okay?"
"Yeah! Can you do it?"
"I'll try."

His fatherly pride stimulated a little bit, he immediately stands up and heads towards the storage room. After rummaging around for a while, he comes back out with a few different knives and some wood, then sits down and starts to whittle. In his experienced hands, the work goes very quickly. The knife whispers as it shaves away at the wood, and in the blink of an eye all of the bark has been stripped off, leaving only the dense, hard core. He looks closely at the knitting needles, then, skillfully and carefully, starts whittling the wood down into the same shape.

"If those needles are sized for wool," he asks, "does this look about right for thread?"
"Umm, can you make them a little bit skinnier?"
"Like this?"
"Like that!"

With the proper size now determined, he changes to another knife, and starts to carve the hook ends of the knitting needles. I can't say he's as good as a real craftsman, but this is something that I can't do myself at all, so I praise him anyway.

"Amazing, Daddy! They're already looking great. Do you think that when you're done, you can polish them really smooth and oil them so that they don't catch any thread? I'd really really appreciate it."
"Sure, leave it to me."

Being praised by his daughter has brought back a lot of his fatherly confidence, it seems. He carefully polishes each needle, in fine spirits.

Heh, just as planned.

While a dark smile flickers over my face, Tory beams angelically, the very picture of pure innocence.

"Maine," she says, "looks like Dad's finally in a good mood again. That's a relief."

“Yeah, yeah, it really is!”

Don’t say anything about how I was the reason my dad was in a bad mood. Definitely don’t say anything about how I thought fawning over my father was troublesome, so I left him alone without bothering to read the mood. I’m just a little girl, after all, so please treat me as if I don’t know anything about bad moods.

My father’s still been working hard on polishing the needles. It looks like they’re almost ready to be used, so I start looking for thread. The ample stockpile of thread that my mother had prepared to use for Tory’s dress has almost all dwindled away. There should be some sort of thread available that isn’t the unbleached white thread that my mother used to make the cloth for the dress. However, the colorful threads that were used to make the sash and the trimmings aren’t in long enough pieces to really make cloth out of.

“Mommy, can I have some threads dyed this color?”
“What do you want to do?”

My mother clearly never thought that I’d ask for thread, so her eyes momentarily grow wide with surprise before she puts on a dubious frown.

“I thought I’d make some *‘lacework’*,” I reply.
“Eh?”
“I want to make something to put in Tory’s hair.”

My mother back in Japan didn’t just turn advertisements into paper baskets. She kept bouncing around, getting swept up in one kind of handicraft after another. It wasn’t any of her business, but she wanted to get me into hobbies that weren’t just reading books, so she dragged me behind her as she went through this crafting boom. In other words, my list of miscellaneous crafting skills is rather large.

Really, among all the handicrafts on my list, lacework is one of the ones that can make a useful finished product. I’m actually quite confident that I’ll be able to make hair ornaments, assuming I have the tools and materials. My life as Urano may be over, but I have no idea what sorts of knowledge I have that might be useful in the future.

However, my mother in this world has no knowledge of my former identity, so she seems to disapprove of my request for some thread. There’s no doubt in my mind that she’s thinking that I’m going to do something useless again, so anything she hands over to me will wind up being wasted.

“If you’re making hair ornaments, those aren’t really going to be useful except at the baptismal ceremony, you know? It’s a waste to use up our thread on such an inconsequential decoration. Flowers are more than enough for a hair ornament. Tory’s already cute, you don’t need to make her any cuter.”
“If you can make something cuter, you must! Cuteness is justice!” I cry, clenching my fist tightly.

My mother, for whatever reason, lets out a sigh, then turns away as if the conversation is

already over. I quickly reach out and grab her skirt.

"Hey, Mommy," I beg, "I'd be okay with just these leftovers here. Daddy worked hard to make these needles for me, and I really want to use them. Let me just try, please?"

I look over at my father, trying to hint that those needles might wind up being worthless. If he got my meaning, or if he realized that his work might be in vain, or maybe even if he was afraid that I'd lose all of my new-found respect for him, he speaks up in my defense.

"It's rare for Maine to take this much interest in sewing, so what do you think about just letting her have the remnants?"
My mother ponders for a bit. "…Hm, I guess you're right," she says, a reluctant expression on her face.

She picks out a few threads and hands them over to me. They're short enough that it might actually be difficult to use them.

"Woohoo! Thanks, Mommy! I love you, Daddy!"

I throw up my hands in celebration. My father looks at me with exaggerated pleasure, grinning with his mouth almost hanging open. He suddenly puts way more strength into polishing the knitting needles, a huge smile on his face. If I may be perfectly honest, it's kind of creepy.

His mood *does* seem to be a lot better, though. He's acting a little weird, so… it'll be better if I just leave him alone, right?

My father gives me the needles, which have been stuffed full of his overbearing affection. I immediately get to work weaving lace. I'm going to make a lot of tiny lace flowers.

Tightly, tightly, tightly, tightly…

Much like my failed attempts to make pseudo-papyrus, making lace involves a lot of tight, tiny weaving and a *lot* of patience. Even if I acknowledge it, though, because the flower that I've been working on is so small, it took me about fifteen minutes to finish a single one. I let the yellow flower roll off my hand and onto the table, then start working on the next one. Tory looks at the little lace flower admiringly, then peers at it closely, tilting her head to once side with a doubtful expression on her face.

"Isn't it kinda too small?"
"I'm going to put a lot of them together as decoration."
"Huh…"

If I made a big one, it would be really bad if I started losing interest before I was finished, right?

I keep the real reason to myself. I really let my big mouth get away from me when I started talking about hair ornaments, so I *really* need to make sure I finish something, which is why I

decided to use a design that I can give up on halfway and still wind up with a usable result, like a collection of tiny flowers. Truthfully, back when I was Urano, I'd always decide I didn't like working on huge designs and wind up giving up halfway through. I need to limit how much that might hurt me.

"I thought about making lace or ribbon, but I don't think I could connect these threads since they're not very long. Plus, it would be weird if the color changed partway through, right? So I'm going to make a bunch of tiny flowers."
"Wow, Maine, you really thought this through."
"Of course! It's cause I'm doing it for you."

I thought through many things before starting this. The final product is going to be made out of whatever I get done in the end, so I can finish it even when I get tired of working on it. Plus, this isn't going to waste any thread, since I can always finish up my current flower and start a new one of a different color when I start to run out.

Tightly, tightly, tightly, tightly…

Once I've finished making a few more tiny flowers, I feel like someone's watching me. I glance up and see that my work has piqued my mother's curiosity, and she's carefully watching what I'm doing with my hands. My mother is good enough at sewing that she's thought of as a "beautiful" woman by this place's standards, and it looks like she's pretty interested in my handiwork. She picks up one of my completed flowers and rolls it around in the palm of her hand.

"…This doesn't seem to be too difficult," she says.
"You already knit a lot with wool, Mommy, so if you learn a few patterns I think you'd be way better at making these than I am, right? Want to try?"

I hand over my needles. My mother starts to knit, her motions fluid even as she studies the flowers. She occasionally picks one up and rolls it around in her fingers, confirming the way they're woven. In the blink of an eye, she's already finished one.

Whoa. As expected of the sewing skills of a beautiful woman. Just by looking at how something's stitched, she figured out how to make it herself. She's so different from me. I had to be taught how to do this step by step, grumbling the entire time.

"Amazing, Mommy."
"Well, *I'm* amazed you knew how to make something like this, Maine," she says. "I've knitted scarves and sweaters, but I never thought to knit decorations like this."

Everyone in this world has their hands so full with just surviving that nobody has the spare time to think about decoration. And, if nobody's making it, then maybe lacework itself is something that nobody's seen before. I was raised in a world where sewing decorations onto clothing was only natural, so I knew about it, but it looks like even tiny decorations like these aren't really known of here.

"So, Maine, now that we've made a lot of these flowers, how are you going to decorate

Tory's hair?"

It seems like my mother can't tell how all the little flowers rolling around on the table are going to be assembled into a finished product. I need to explain things to her in the simplest possible way I can think of.

"Ummm… so we take these scraps of fabric and make them into a circle, and then sew the flowers on one by one. It'll look like a bouquet of flowers after that, right? Then, we wrap that around a *'hairpin'*, and… wait, *'hairpin'*?!"

In the middle of my explanation, all of the blood suddenly drains from my face. My mother jumps, startled, as I suddenly raise my voice.

"Maine, what are you yelling about all of a sudden?"
"…Oh no, what do I do… I don't have a *'hairpin'*, huh…"

This is really bad! There's no hairpins in this world, or at the very least I haven't seen any in this house. I haven't seen any elastic hairbands either. This is a world where everyone ties their hair back with string. How the hell am I going to finish this off?!

"D… D-d-d… Daddyyyy!"

I immediately abandon my plan to leave my father alone. I rush over to him, taking up my begging posture again. Describing a hairpin by words alone is going to be difficult, so I take out my slate and draw a picture as I explain it to him.

"I need one side of it to be pointy, like my hair sticks, and then the other side needs to be flat, like this, with a little hole drilled into it. It's kinda like my hair sticks, but shorter. Can you do it?!"
"Sure, this is actually simpler than those knitting needles."
"Really?! Daddy, you're amazing! Now more than ever, you're the best!!"

I hug him tightly in a gratuitous display of overflowing gratitude. "Heh heh heh, leave it to me," he says, quietly. It seems like he still feels the need to compete with Otto.

My father cheerfully whittles a somewhat short hairpin for me. I sew together the lace mini-bouquet, then thread it through the hole in the hairpin, kind of like I'm sewing on a button.

"Alright, done! Tory, put on your new dress and come over here!"

Tory puts on her summer dress, then comes over to sit in the chair closest to the fire. I scoot my own chair over behind her, then kick off my shoes and climb up to stand on top of it. I undo her braid, comb it out, then loosely weave together hair from both sides of her head. Tory's hair is naturally wavy and fluffy, like it's permed, so I bring it back and weave it so it's half-up.[2] This hairstyle on her gives off an amazingly showy atmosphere.

I tie up the center of the braid tightly with a simple cord, then stick the hairpin through the knot so that it won't fall off. Against Tory's blue-green hair, the little flowers of blue, yellow,

and white seem to shine.

"Yep, cute!" I say.
"Wow, really!" says my mother. "You look very cute, Tory."
"Maine, you're pretty skilled with your hands," says my father. "You might not be strong, but we can probably find you a job that needs nimble fingers like yours."

Tory smiles shyly as the family admires her, turning this way and that to show off. She reaches up to feel the hairpin, but after a little while she puffs her cheeks out in frustration.

"Maine," she says, "you put everything in the back, so I can't see it at all, you know?"
"I guess so, but… I can't really help you there."
"But, I don't really know what I look like right now."

We don't have any mirrors in this house, so there's no real way for me to show her what she looks like. I think about what I should do for a little while as Tory's face grows unhappier and unhappier. I try to show her on my own head, pulling the mini-bouquet out of her hair and sticking it into mine, next to my own hair sticks.

"It looks kind of like this! What do you think?"

As soon as she sees the hairpin in my hair, Tory cheers loudly. "Whoa, cute! Amazing! Hey, Mom. Does my hair look like that?"
"Well, Maine's hair is straighter and all done up, and the colors of the threads we used match your hair much better. It definitely suits you more, Tory."
"Ahh, really… I see! Hee hee hee…"

Her cheeks flush red and she smiles so wide that it looks like she might crack her face in two. She pulls her hairpin from my hair.

"Thanks, everyone! I'm super happy."

With spring just around the corner, we have made Tory a perfectly coordinated outfit. If I'm not mistaken, she's easily going to be the most eye-catching girl at this summer's baptismal ceremony.

After that, my mother got really into doing her own lacework, and the needles my father made for me suddenly disappeared into my mother's sewing kit.

…Well, that's okay, I guess.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. A Japanese festival for seven, five, and three-year olds, which is generally considered a kind of coming-of-age ceremony. The name literally translates to "seven-five-three".
2. Like this, probably. (I had to look it up to make sure I got the description right, so I figured I should link the reference.)

016Bring Me To The Forest

The snow in the forest has begun to melt, and the tiny sprouts of new plants have begun to appear. That's what Tory told me, when she came back from there. The children have started heading to the forest again to forage, which means that my long, idle hibernation where I had nothing to read and too much time on my hands is over at last.

Finally, I can make my clay tablets! I really want to head to the forest as well, so that I can get to work.

Tory said that there's still a lot of snow left, walking is difficult due to treacherous footing, and there's not very much out there to gather right now. However, I don't particularly care if there's a lot of stuff to gather or there's nothing at all.

What I'm after is slimy, clay-like earth, which means excavation. If I can just get to the forest, I've already won.

Of course, there's no way that anyone would let me head out to the forest by myself. I need to get Tory to supervise me. So, I've drawn up close to her in order to beg for her kindness.

"Please, Tory! I wanna go to the forest too, and make friends with the other kids. Could you take me along with you, please?"
"No way, you can't even walk that far."

Her answer hasn't changed at all. If she's going to keep having this little confidence in me, I'm facing total defeat here.

"I've gotten a little stronger! If I can't go with you, I can wait for you at the gates! Pleeease!"

Tory hesitates. I've been doing radio calisthenics every day, eating as much as I can, and going out with Tory when she goes downstairs to the well to wash the dishes. I've worked hard to boost my strength, and I think I'm just about ready.

"…If Dad says it's okay," she says.

Giving up on just shooing me away, she foists responsibility off on my father. Practically, though, if I were to end up waiting at the gate, I was going to need to ask my father anyway, so this was inevitable. Next, I must persuade my father.

"Daddy, can I go to the forest? I haven't gotten sick in a while!"
"Hmmm, that is true…"

During the winter, I took extra good care of my health, and the rate at which my fevers spiked went down. I only got five of them!

Ah, that's not a lot, you know? That's way lower than it once was. My family even kept admiring how much healthier I was, saying "whoa, amazing" and so on.

Since my fevers didn't come very often, I was able to keep a lot more food down. As a result, naturally, my nutritional intake was way better, and I've even grown a bit! Most likely, my physical strength has increased as well.

"If I can't make it for some reason, I can rest at the gates with you! Well? Well?"
"Hmmmmm," he says, thinking things over.

He didn't dismiss the notion immediately, so I think I might actually have a chance with him, unlike Tory. I cling to him desperately, trying to get his approval.

"Once I get used to it, I'll make it through! There's three-year-olds that go to the forest, right? So it's not impossible that I could do it!"
"Ahh, well… sure, there are, but they're the kinds of kids that get into trouble when they're left alone at home, so they have to get brought along."
"…So, if I get in trouble, I'll get to go?"
"No need to do that," he scolds. "Don't be stupid."

If I can't somehow secure my father's permission, then when springtime comes around and my mother goes back to work, I'm going to be left once again in the care of old lady Gerda. That would be very hard on my mental state. Absolutely no way. I don't want to have to look after all the other children left with her.

"Daddy, are you worried about me because I'm not very strong? How can I make you think that it's okay if I go out to the forest?"
"Hmmm, let me think…"

My father closes his eyes, deep in thought. I wait breathlessly for his reply.

"…For now, just come with me to the gate."
"Only to the gate? How long is 'for now'?"
"Until you can walk all the way to the gate without help. Once you can walk without slowing everyone down, you'll be okay to head into the forest."

As I expected, it isn't quite so easy to get permission to go out to the forest. It feels like the clay tablets I've staked my ambitions on are getting further and further away. Working to build my strength by walking to and from my father's workplace at the gate is probably the biggest compromise the completely unreliable me can squeeze out.

Tch, I really wanted to go, too. My tablets…

I can't go to the forest, but at the very least this plan means that I don't have to stay with old lady Gerda. This is an acceptable compromise.

"…Okay. I'll do what you said!" I say, nodding once in agreement.

My father suddenly looks relieved, all the tension draining from his face. Did he really think I wasn't going to agree, and that I'd start running amok?

“Hey, Daddy. When you said you wanted me to walk to the gate, do you mean just going back and forth?”
“Nah, I’ll have Otto teach you some more of the alphabet,” he says. “Eh?! …Really?”

I thought that my f

"I understand, but, Maine's going to be in trouble if she never gets strong enough to go to the forest."
"I guess so, but… she'll get in the way…"
"That's right. Right now, she'll just be a hindrance."

Both Tory *and* my father quite plainly said I am a hindrance. I already know that myself, but hearing them affirm it right in front of me like is still a blow to my pride.

"If she can at least get to the point where she can keep up with you, then even if she can't go all the way to the forest, she'll come with you as far as the gate. Until she can make it to the gate herself, I'll be the one to go with her, but when she's ready I hope you'll cooperate too." "…Okay, I'll try."

Tory, the burden of responsibility weighing down on her, nods her head in agreement. My shoulders, however, still slump. It seems that my family's estimation of my strength is *still* the lowest it could possibly be.

I see… they still don't think I'll be able to walk all the way to the gate, even though I've been going all the way up and down those stairs to get to the water well lately without being out of breath at all…

The next day, as the sun climbs high in the sky, my father and I set out for the gates. I only follow along with him when he has the day shift. Guard duty operates on a three-shift system. The morning shift lasts from when the gates are opened in the morning, until about noon, the day shift then goes until the gates are closed in the evening, and the night watch guards the gates from when they are closed in the evening until when they are opened once again the next morning.

Until I can walk all the way to the gates by myself, I accompany my father to the gates on his day shift, then I either go back with Tory if I'm feeling up for it at the time or I wait for my father to finish his duties and go home with him.

"Make sure Maine doesn't overdo it," says my mother to my father. "Keep a close eye on her!"
"Ahhh, of course," he replies. "Let's go, Maine!"
"Bye, Mom!"

Waving goodbye to my worried mother, I grab my father's hand and head off for the gates. Making it all the way down the stairs doesn't give me much trouble anymore, but by the time we make it out to the main street, I'm starting to feel a little out of breath. Come to think of it, this is the first time I've ever walked out this far on my own. I'm usually being carried on someone's back, riding in a wagon, or riding piggyback on someone's shoulders by this point.

"How are you holding up, Maine?"
"I'm… still… fine…!"

If I give up here, they'll never let me go to the forest. My unrelenting obsession forces me to

say I'm fine, but my physical condition is anything but fine right now. My body is heavy, and I'd like nothing more than to just sit down right here.

"You're not fine at all! …Up we go!"

Of his own accord, my father stops walking, turns around, and picks me up. I cling desperately to him, my breath rough and ragged as I suck in air.

Impossible! This will kill me! My family's absolutely correct. There's no way I can make it to the forest.

My father winds up carrying me in his arms for over half of the trip to the gate. When we arrive, he carries me into the night duty room so that I can rest. In all honesty, I don't think I can do anything that *isn't* taking a break. I am absolutely dead tired, so when my father lays me down on one of the benches inside, I lay there for quite some time. After noontime has come and gone, I finally am able to sit myself upright.

"Hey, Daddy. You said Otto's going to be teaching me how to write, but that takes a lot of time, right? Is that okay? What about his other work?"

I'm pretty sure Otto has gatekeeping duties, and I'm pretty sure that teaching me the alphabet is not one of the usual duties of a soldier.

"Otto's job actually is teaching people how to write. We have new recruits coming in."
"New recruits?"
"After the springtime baptism, we get about five new apprentice soldiers. It's Otto's job to teach them how to read and write."

It's a good thing for a soldier to be able to read and write. If you can't write down the names and titles of the people who pass through the gate, then you can't be a gatekeeper.

"Am I going to be learning with them?"
"Yeah, that's the plan. But, you're not there as a new recruit, you're there because you're Otto's assistant."
"Assistant?"

Can a kid like me really be an assistant like that? This might just be me talking, but I look like I'm three years old. I don't think anyone would believe for a second that I really was Otto's assistant.

"Maine, you helped Otto with his work before, right?"
"Yeah, with the financial reports and the budget… but those were just calculations."

I only helped Otto out that one time. Since he looked so ashamed to have asked me for that favor, I felt like I shouldn't tell anyone about it, not even my father. Otto, however, seems to have told him, even though that might have gotten him in trouble.

"Ahh… I might have put too big of a burden on Otto when I asked him to do all of that work,

all by himself, with nobody to help him. He suggested that you might be interested in helping him, in exchange for learning how to read and write."

Although I'd decided that being taught the alphabet was my reward, I actually wasn't joking when I said I wanted to be Otto's assistant.

"You're going to basically be Otto's personal assistant, but it's not allowed for kids who haven't been baptized yet to have a job. So, we're going to say that he's really teaching you how to write, which is why you're coming to see him at the gates. Your salary will be in slate pencils, and you'll have time off whenever you're not feeling well. Otto wanted to emphasize that this isn't easy work, you'll be helping him with budgets and more."

Apparently, Otto specifically asked for me so that I can learn how to write and help him out with the paperwork. Is he thinking ahead to next year's budget season? On top of that, by going through his superiors, he was able to get my slate pencil salary officially approved from the budget instead of having to pay me out-of-pocket. As expected of a merchant! It feels like he's working to maximize his own profits.

"Maine," calls Otto, "We're about to start, are you ready?"
"Yes!"

I grab my tote bag and head from the night room to the training room. In one corner, a wooden table and chairs have been set up. Five boys sit there, probably the apprentice soldiers my father was talking about.

"This is Maine, the squad leader's daughter. She helps out with some of the paperwork here. She wants to learn how to write, so she'll be joining us today. Don't make a big deal out of this."

After giving me that kind of introduction, Otto begins his lessons. He writes out what appears to be the fundamental letters of the alphabet. Well, I haven't memorized all of these, so it can't be helped that this is the first step.

"These are all of the letters of the alphabet."

Today, we're practicing five out of the thirty-five letters of the alphabet, writing them out on our slates while repeating their pronunciations. Since I was already taught a little bit about some of these letters, memorizing these takes little effort at all.

"…Maine, you really do learn things quickly," says Otto.
"I really like doing things like this, more than I like doing things physically," I reply.

Unlike the ordinary children of this world, I am already very much accustomed to studying. I also have no problem at all with studying on my own, and my memory is very good. Basically, this is something that I both like and am very good at. Placing me next to these rank beginners, clumsily sweeping their poorly-gripped pencils in amateurish strokes, makes them look even more pitiful by comparison.

“Mister Otto,” I say, “I think we should move on to the next thing soon.”
“Eh? Already?”

It feels like it’s only been about thirty minutes, but it looks like the boys think that sitting still and practicing writing is torturous. They’ve started fidgeting in their seats, proof that they’ve already had enough.

“It’s hard for someone who’s just picked up a slate for the first time to focus on one thing for so long. We’ve practiced writing, now we should do some math, then draw maps of the area around the town, then learn the things soldiers need to know. We should take breaks every once in a while to move around. If we experience a little bit of a lot of different things during the day, we’ll master them a lot better.”

It’s probably best to think of these children as elementary schoolers. In Japan, we’d never sit down an elementary school student and force them to write _hiragana_[1] over and over for an entire day. They wouldn’t be able to handle it, and the boys of this world, who aren’t accustomed to sitting still at all, would fare far worse.

“Let’s work on calculations next,” I say. “How about we start with counting?”

Since everyone’s been shopping before, they all know how to count up to about ten. However, there’s a few kids that don’t quite seem to get it, so we spend some time writing out the numerals from zero to five while reading them aloud. Again, the boys all start to fidget in their chairs after a while, so I wrap up the lesson and send them away to work on their physical fitness.

“Let’s wrap up studying for today. Make sure you memorize the letters and numbers we learn today by next time. If any of you don’t have them down, you’re going to spend a lot more studying in here, alone, until you get it right. It’s very important that you learn these!”

The children spread out through the room. I’m no longer needed in the training room, so Otto leads me back into the night duty room. He frowns at me, disapprovingly.

“Maine, you’re being too soft,” he says. “They’ll never learn that way.”
“Nuh-uh. If we know that learning is hard for them, and that it’ll take extra time, then it’s okay if we only teach them that much at once. Don’t compare them all to me!”
“Ah... right...”

Otto scratches at his face, his stubble crackling under his fingertips. It seems like he’s realized that he might have been subconsciously comparing the other children to me.

“On top of that, if we go over it next time and they haven’t memorized it, they won’t get to go home until they do, right? So now it’s a matter of personal duty. That’s not soft at all, you know?”
“I see! That’s actually pretty strict towards these kids that have just barely started to work.”

A grim smile crosses Otto’s face. I smile back at him, and breathe a soft sigh.

I never asked about helping out with teaching the new recruits as well, but if kids like that are my classmates, my own studies will get nowhere.

Otto comes back into the night duty room, then spends the remaining time with me doing private tutoring. He teaches me how to write certain vocabulary words, then I practice them. While I'm busy, he works on his paperwork.

"Well, Maine, it looks like you've got the alphabet memorized, so let's get you started on some vocabulary. I'll teach you some of the most common words."
"Okay!"

Mr. Otto does in fact teach me vocabulary words, but a lot of the words he's teaching me have to do with equipment or gatekeeping duties. It really does look like he has his sights set on making me help him write up official documents. If he can make me more useful, then he's probably going to draft me into helping out with all of the paperwork come next year's budget season.

Some of the first words he taught me were "character reference", "nobleman", "letter of introduction", and "petition", you know? How are these "the most common words"? At the very least, if we started by learning the names of goods, I could learn words like "hay" or "foodstuffs", and the names of kinds of weapons and armor…

My pencil clacks against the slate as I continue to spell out words. Suddenly, my father's voice cuts through the room, telling me that it's almost time for the gates to close and that Tory and her friends have just returned from the forest. I put my slate back in my tote bag and run outside to meet everyone.

"Tory!" I call, waving.
"Let's head home, Maine."

There are a few other children with Tory. They all have bags and boxes strapped to their backs, packed full of their tools and the things that they've gathered. A couple of them give me strange looks, eyeing my single tote bag suspiciously.

"Eh? 'Maine'?" says one of them.
"Is that Tory's little sister? I've never seen her before."

I hide behind Tory, shielding myself from the impolite stares of these filthy children.

"Maine doesn't come outside very much," says Tory, chuckling wryly, "so it's only natural you wouldn't have met her."

It seems like the fact that I never show my face at any of the big local events is causing these kids to treat me like they just saw a rare monster spawn. Tory tries to reassure me that they're just curious and not trying to tease me, but their stares still hurt.

"Maine, you're going back with us?" asks a familiar voice.
"Lutz!!"

Inwardly, I breathe a huge sigh of relief, seeing Lutz's familiar face in the group. I look around, trying to find Ralph, but there's no sign of his red hair and strong build anywhere.

"Huh? Is Ralph not with you today? Is he okay?"
"Ralph turned seven this spring, so he's working today."
"Ahhh…"

Ralph was only seven? That's what Maine's memories seemed to say, but since he was so strong and so caring, I thought he had to actually be at least eight or nine. Huh? Is it just me, or did Lutz grow a bunch over the winter? It looks like this world still obeys the laws of heredity.

As I've been carefully considering these matters, we've started walking. These kids have been out in the forest all day and want to get home as quickly as possible to get their heavy packs off of their backs, so they're walking at a pretty decent pace. Tory and Lutz notice that I'm in danger of getting left behind, and call out to the group to slow down for me.

"Hey, everyone, don't rush!"
"You doing okay, Maine?"

I was planning on powering through and keeping up with them, but no matter how hard I tried the group started steadily pulling ahead. Children are merciless. There's no way they were going to wait up for me.

"Everyone, you're going too fast…" says Lutz.
"Sorry, Lutz," says Tory. "Do you mind slowing down for Maine? I have to keep an eye on all of the kids."

Tory is the oldest of this group of unbaptized children, so she needs to look out for everyone in the group, not just her little sister.

"Got it," says Lutz. "Maine, take your time. I've got a lot of things I'm carrying today, so I won't be able to carry you too if you get tired halfway through."
"Okay," I reply.

I may have been left behind, but Lutz falls back to walk with me on my way home. I don't want to get tired and burden Lutz any further, so I slow down to conserve my energy.

"What were you at the gate for, Maine?" he asks.
"I was studying the alphabet," I reply. "The alphabet? You can write?!"

Lutz is extremely shocked by this revelation. His eyes gleam with respect as he turns to look at me, but it only makes me feel uncomfortable. I wouldn't really describe myself as being able to write, since I only really know a few specific words.

"I can't really write anything but my name very well. I'm still practicing."
"Whoa, Maine! You can write your name?!"

Huh? Did that somehow make him respect me more?

I never would have thought that just being able to write your name would be so impressive. Although, now that I'm actually thinking about it, if the village elder is the only person in an entire village of peasants who can read and write, then it really is comparatively amazing that my father can write down other people's names.

I consider that first-grade level skill, but in this world, it's really worthy of respect…

I suddenly realize how precious being able to help out with paperwork is. It did seem like Otto was more interested in my upbringing than the other soldiers. If I decided that it was good enough for me to just be able to write other people's names, there's no way he'd be able to teach me how to write up official documents.

"Hahh…… hahh……"
"Maine, you okay?"

In my case, learning how to write is the easy part. Building up my strength is what's painful. Lutz helps me along the entire rest of the way, but by the time I make it back home, I'm so exhausted that I can't even speak.

As expected, I'm immediately stricken with another fever, lasting two whole days.

"That's why I said not to push yourself too hard!" huffs my mother, but I seem to have actually gotten a little stronger. Ordinarily, I'd be out of action for five days, but this time I was actually ready to head back out on the third day.

After a while, I settled into a routine. I'd walk with my dad towards the gate, although I got tired about halfway through, requiring him to carry me the rest of the way. I spent the day practicing how to write and helping Otto with calculations. When the children came back from the forest, I went along with them, but would immediately lose my breath and fall behind, causing Lutz to hang back with me, worried. Then, after I got home, then I'd be out for another few days.

This lasted for over a month, but then I definitely started to get stronger. I started with one day of going out and three days of rest, but then I got it down to two days, and then I started only resting every other day. At that point, I was still going very slowly, but I was somehow managing to make it all the way to the gate on my own. After that, I started going two, even three days in a row, still only taking a day off in between.

When I first made it to the gates five days in a row, my family was thrilled.

"You did it, Maine! That's the first time you've made it all the way without a break," said Tory.
"You've really gotten stronger. I'm so proud of you!" said my father.
"You should be about ready to head to the forest," said my mother.

Right after my family finally praised me, I was immediately hit with another fever, taking me out for another two whole days. It seems like things didn't work quite as well as I planned.

Three months after I started going back and forth between the gates, I'm finally given permission to head into the forest. Here and there, I can see glimpses of summertime. It seems that spring is at its end.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Hiragana is the most basic syllabary in Japanese. It's the first set of characters taught to students.

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017Three Cheers for Mesopotamia!

Today is the very first day I will be heading to the forest on my own two feet. Today, I'm leaving my tote bag and slate at home. Instead, I've got a wooden basket on my back like everyone else (although mine is smaller), containing a shovel that I'll be using to dig up the earth. I can't help but think of a wooden spatula when I look at this shovel, though. To be perfectly honest, I think this spatula is going to be even less effective at actual excavation than the little plastic shovels that kids use in the sandbox. Doesn't anyone else see this?

As I brandish the shovel, which absolutely looks like it is going to break immediately, my father grabs me firmly by the shoulder. He turns me around to face him, and starts giving me the same lecture that he's been constantly giving ever since we decided that I could go to the forest.

"Maine. All you're doing today is going to the forest, then coming back. Everyone's going to have a lot of things to carry on their way back, and they're going to be tired. I want you to rest up while you're out there so that you'll have enough energy to make it back with them by yourself. Understand?"
"I got it!"

My father's face grows very serious for a moment, although I can't tell if it's just because of my answer itself or because any of my frustrations at being told this countless times might be starting to spill over. He turns to Tory.

"Tory," he says, "this might be tough, so I'm counting on you. Please talk with Lutz to make sure he knows that Maine is going to have to make it back before the gates close."
"Okay. Today we'll make sure to leave early," she replies.

Tory already has an overflowing sense of responsibility, but when she hears my father's request, her sense of duty burns brightly as well. Today, she seems a little more strict than usual.

By the time we head outside, there are already other children gathered near the well, boxes and baskets strapped to their backs as well. There's a total of eight of us, ranging from the young kids like me who haven't really started growing up to the older kids like Tory and Fey, who are a little bit bigger and stronger. Fey leads the way with his pink hair while Tory brings up the rear. As for me, I'll start at the front with Fey, but by the time we reach our destination I'll have fallen more or less to the rear.

"Alright, Maine. Let's go! Don't slow down, okay?"

I may be used to walking to the gates by now, but this is my first time going all the way to the forest. Thus, Lutz will be setting the pace for me. Over the last three months while walking between the gates and my home, Lutz has been gradually been figuring out what the upper bounds of my walking speed are. It's thanks to him that we'll be going at a speed that's only as fast as I can comfortably go.

"Thanks, Lutz," I say.
"No, thank *you*, Maine, you've been a big help too," he replies.

The other day, we had to finish off the last of the leftover squeezed paru. It seems that paru, which can apparently only be harvested during the winter, go bad very quickly once the weather starts to warm up. So, in thanks for everything they've done for me so far, I modified the recipe for bean curd hamburgers and taught them how to make paruburgers.

I made a sauce by boiling down a kind of fruit called a "pomay". It looks at a glance like a yellow bell pepper, but it has a very tomato-like consistency and flavor on the inside. To finish the dish off, I melted cheese on top of it. The gentle sweetness of the paru added an unexpectedly deep flavor to the dish. I was a little shocked myself, and I made it!

Incidentally, Lutz literally started *crying* earlier, and his older brothers followed suit. They seem to have been deeply moved by the fact that I managed to double the amount of delicious food that they were able to eat during the winter. Carla, their mother, thanked me from the bottom of her heart for how easy my style of cooking is on their family's finances. Having to feed four kids must be extremely rough. Engel's law is absolutely murderous when you're at the low end of the scale, huh?

"Maine, why couldn't you have told us about paruburgers during the winter?!" Lutz complains.
"Well, if you want to mince beef, it has to be very fresh, you know? Also, mincing meat is really difficult, and I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to convince everyone to help me…"
"Ahhh, yeah, it's tough, but we would have done it for the sake of your cooking!"

I completely lack the strength required to work a knife for long enough to actually mince meat, and there was no way my mother would have agreed to doing something so difficult, so until now I haven't been able to eat anything like a hamburger. I'm very glad that Lutz and his family were able to help me, and I consider myself very lucky to have been able to enjoy paruburgers with them.

We keep a steady pace towards the forest, chatting about cooking along the way. Talking as we walk made the long journey actually kind of enjoyable, but as soon as we hit the forest all of the fatigue catches up to me at once, crashing over me like a wave. While everyone goes off to start foraging, I sit myself down on a sizable rock and try to recover as much of my stamina as I can. As I sit on my rock, hunched over and sucking in short, ragged breaths, Lutz comes over, obviously concerned.

He pats me on my back. "Maine, you're going to need to get used to coming out here. Otherwise, it'll be a big problem once Fey and Tory have their baptisms."
"…Why's …that?" I gasp.

I certainly am aware that Tory is about to get baptized. After all, she has new clothes for the occasion, and I helped make her some hairpins. I'm not, however, very clear on what all happens *after* the ceremony.

"After she gets baptized, she's going to start her apprenticeship, right? So that means that you're going to have to come out here alone for half the week."

My eyes go wide as Lutz explains the situation. When Tory starts her apprenticeship, then I'm going to have far less help from her when it comes to a lot of the things I do every day.

"Wh… what do I do? I hadn't really considered this…"

Maine may be weak, but her life has been quite pleasant thanks to the fact that Tory is such a dependable older sister. If Maine needed anything, she could always bother Tory for it. Without Tory there, though, I don't think I'll be able to live. The blood drains from my face as I quietly sit there and panic. Lutz, however, chuckles, scratching at his nose.

"Heh heh, well, when Tory's gone, I can help you out instead. You're still so weak!"
"Thanks, Lutz. I'm really glad for your help."
"Ah… well, I've got to go looking for firewood, so you should just stay here and rest up." He adjusts his backpack, then turns to walk away. "If you can't make it back to the city, we'll be in big trouble, you know!"

Lutz wanders off, heading deeper into the forest. After his footsteps have faded into the distance, I look around my surroundings to make sure that there's nobody around, then drop to the ground, pull out my makeshift shovel, and get ready start my excavations.

Today, my goal was to make it all the way to the forest and back without getting sick. *However!!* I've made it all the way out here, to the forest, at long last! Is it even possible for me to just go home without even trying to challenge this obstacle? Absolutely not! Dig! Dig! Dig until you can't dig any more!

I'm hoping to find some clay-like soil, but how far down am I going to have to dig to find it? Assuming the soil composition here is like it is back on Earth, I should be able to find some if I dig a fair ways down.

"Hi-YAH!"

With all of my power, I thrust my shovel deep into the soil. Unfortunately, this vaguely shovel-shaped piece of wood only manages to get about a centimeter in.

This is solid! Uh… can I even really dig here?

This feels like I'm trying to dig up the packed dirt beneath a well-used sports field. I had this image in my mind of a forest's soil being a lot more moist and loose than this. I feel a little betrayed.

Is it the really soil that's too hard, though, or is it that this shovel is terrible? …Yeah, I'm betting it's the shovel.

There is a world of difference between my concept of what a shovel should look like and *this* thing. I wanted something made out of metal, at least, not wood! Regardless, though, it

doesn't matter if the shovel's made of wood, or if the ground is too hard or too soft, abandoning this is just not an option. Even if progress is going to be slow, what choice do I have but to continue digging?

Scraping, scraping, scraping, scraping…

My wooden shovel slowly peels away the topmost layers of dirt. Unearthing my clay is going to take a lot of time, patience, and strength, and it really doesn't look like I'm going to be able to get it done in just one day. It looks like making clay tablets is going to be some serious work. I can only pray that it will be easier than my attempt to make pseudo-papyrus.

Scraping, scraping, scraping, scraping…

By the time I've gotten maybe five centimeters deep, I hear someone's footsteps approach from behind me.

"What the heck are you doing, Maine?" says Lutz as he approaches, both hands full of sticks and branches. His eyes go wide as he sees me sitting on the ground, digging with my shovel. "You promised that you were going to stay put and rest if we took you with us to the forest, right?!"

I certainly did promise that when we were leaving, but there was no way I could just sit tight when my target was finally right in front of me. I was planning on stopping before Lutz returned, but once I got started, I just couldn't quit.

…W, what do I do?

I was able to fool my father with a smile and a hug, but Lutz and Tory have specifically been appointed my guardians. I won't be able to trick them that easily. I know from experience that if I try, that would only make me look more suspicious, and they'd end up asking me even more direct questions.

"Uh, ummm… you see, Lutz," I stammer.
"…I see what?"

Lutz furrows his brow, puts his hands on his hips, and looks down at me sternly. My interrogation has begun. Well then. If I tell him the truth, he's going to get mad at me for not thinking things through, and if I lie, then he's going to see through it and get mad at me for lying to him. Which of these options is the least damaging?

"I'm pretty sure that I told you that you need to be resting, so what the heck were you doing?" he demands.
"…Um, ummm! I was digging a hole!!"

The truth spills out of my mouth as my will crumbles under Lutz's imposing aura.

I'm actually pretty scared of him getting angry at me. I'm pretty dependent on him right now. If he storms off, I won't make it back home before the gates close.

"Yeah, I can *see* that. What are you digging for?"

Even though I'd answered honestly, Lutz seems twice as angry now. He glares at me from above, his eyes cold as ice.

"Well, um, you see… I want some *'clay'*."
"Huh? You want some what?"

Lutz cocks his head to one side, unable to understand what I'm getting at. His expression grows slightly more dubious, and seemingly slightly less angry.

"I want soil that's really dense and solid, the kind where water doesn't drain away."
"…If you wanted that, wouldn't there be a lot more of that over there, where there's not a lot of trees and grass?"

If soil has bad drainage, then it's difficult for plants to grow there. I guess it would be much more efficient to look for a place with fewer plants.

"Thanks, Lutz!" I say, immediately standing up to leave.
"Hey! Maine, wait!"

Lutz reaches out and grabs me by the scruff of my neck before I can run away. He's got both size and strength over me, so there's no way I can escape.

"Let me go, Lutz."
"Your job today is to rest, Maine. Haven't you been listening?" he says, pulling on my ears. "This isn't something you need to run out and get literally right now, right?"
"Ow, ow, ow!" Flustered, I flail my arms ineffectively as I cry out. "I don't need it to live! I just really want it, so I wasn't going to bother anyone to help me get it!"

Lutz lets go of my ears, and I immediately clap my hands over them, glaring up at him with teary eyes. He falters, just a little bit, although I don't know if it's because he can't come up with a good rebuttal or because he's scared of the powerful love that I show towards books despite not really being materialistic otherwise. What's important, though, is that this is an opening that my instincts are telling me that I cannot let slip past. Now is my time to strike!

"If you make me sit still here, are you going to go dig it up yourself?!"
"…I've actually gathered my share of the firewood for today, so I can do that. So, Maine, sit there and be good."

I am floored by this completely unexpected reply. My jaw drops, and I can do nothing but stare blankly up at him. He should have lashed back out at me for what I just said, but… is this guy an idiot? He surely has more important things to do than helping me work on a project that he has no interest in at all. Rather than digging up clay, shouldn't he be gathering something?

"Lutz, um, I'm happy you want to help, but don't you have your own things to do?"
"Maine, you're really weak, and there's no way you'll be able to dig that up, so I'll do it for

you. You can pay me back by telling me what it is you need it for and what you want to do."
"…Why, though?"
"Well, if I know what you want to do with it, then I can help you avoid doing something useless. Just now, even though you knew exactly what you wanted, you were digging in the wrong place, you know?"

Ouch, right in my weak spot.

Even though I certainly know what it is I'm after, I don't know the words for it in this language, I don't know what things might look like here that are different in Japan, and I don't have the tools that I need. There are a lot of places where I can go wrong. After that explanation, I definitely understand now how useful it would be to have Lutz's help in this project, but I still don't actually know what his motivation is.

"Why do you want to help me like this?"
"Hm? You made me parucakes when I was super, super hungry that one time, right? I decided right then that I needed to help you out in the future."

Huh? Just like that? That's all it took to get him to dig up some clay for me? Wow, I shouldn't underestimate the power of tasty food.

To be perfectly honest, I have no idea what's going on in Lutz's head that makes him equate pancakes to heavy labor, but as far as I'm concerned, he's a lifesaver. Lutz offered to help of his own volition and without any reservations, so of course I'll accept. It's fantastic that I have someone to entrust the heavy lifting to.

"…Okay, I'll leave it to you," I say. "I'll wait here."
"Okay! I just need to finish this up real quick."

In a flash, he gathers up his firewood and stows it away. Real quick, indeed. Then, he leads me over to where he thinks that the drainage in the soil is poor, at a somewhat low, sloping spot in the forest floor.

"Should be around here," he says, pulling out the shovel I had brought with me. He shoves the wooden, spatula-like implement into the earth and begins to dig.

"Maine, you brought this shovel all the way out here. This digging thing isn't just some impulse, is it. Were you even intending to keep your promise?"
"Um!? W… well, uh… ummm, I finally was able to come out here, and I just couldn't wait any longer. So I guess I did plan this…"

His face twitching, Lutz stabs the shovel deep into the ground with all his might in a sudden outburst of emotion.

"Craaap, I wasn't paying enough attention. You looked like you were going to be good!"
"Yeah, but… my daddy was paying even less attention."
"Your dad's way too soft on you!"

Lutz, fueled by his anger, tears up the earth, despite the fact that he's using the wooden shovel I was barely able to make any progress width. Unlike the slow, steady scraping that I was doing, Lutz pounds away at the ground, gouging out chunks of the earth with every strike. This is a marvel to watch.

Is this just the strength difference? Or is it the way he's doing it? Is there a knack to it?

"Huh? The color of the dirt is different down here?"

Lutz has excavated about fifteen centimeters down to a layer where the earth is a different color.

"Is this what you want, Maine?" he asks, holding up a small chunk of earth, which I take from him.

It's cool to the touch, dense, and sticky, and it changes shape as I try to mold it with my fingers. There's no mistake, this is exactly the kind of clay I was searching for.

"Yeah, this is it! Wow, Lutz, you're so strong! This would have taken me forever to do."
"I'm definitely not as weak as you, at least," he says, as he continues to dig out more clay.

My eyes glitter with excitement as I start ferrying the growing pile of clay, bit by bit, over to a nearby rock. How many tablets am I going to be able to make with this, I wonder? I'm still only just thinking ahead, but I'm already starting to fall in love with these lumps of clay.

"So, what are you going to do with this?" he asks.
"Eheheh~, I'm going to make some *'clay tablets'*."
"'Cleh tab-luts'?"
"Yeah!"

I squeeze and stretch the clay, Lutz's effort given form, into the shape of a thin clay board. When I've finished stretching into shape, I pick up a thin stick from the ground, then start to write out the fairy tales that my mother back in Japan used to tell me.

I really want to be writing this in the local language if I could, but the things Otto's been teaching me are all the high-level vocabulary that are needed for work. I can probably write out boilerplate text for a nobleman's title or letter of introduction by now, but I still don't know any words that are actually useful in ordinary circumstances. For now, I'll stick to writing in Japanese.

"Maine, are those words you're writing?"
"Yeah, they are. If I record everything in a document like this, then if I forget something in the future I can read this to remember it. Documents are amazing, you know! If I write out enough of these like this, I can then collect them into a book, which is even more amazing."
"Ahh……"
"Lutz, thank you so much for getting me this clay! If there's something else you need to go gather, then you can go do that, okay? I'll just stay here and write."
"Got it."

The story that I'm writing right now feels like it should be titled "The Shoemaker and the Elves, Alternate Universe Edition". I try to squeeze as many characters onto each slab as I can, but in the end it takes me nearly ten tablets to finish the story.

"Alright, I did it!"

At the bottom of the page, I scribe the character for "the end", visibly trembling with excitement. I spin around, throwing my hands in the air in glee.

Clay tablets are amazing! Clay tablets are *doable*! Three cheers for the great ancient civilization of Mesopotamia!

Once I get these home, I can fire them in the stove. If they don't crack and fall apart, then they truly will be complete. I clench my writing stick tightly in my fist, then turn around to gaze upon my spread of tablets.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

In the next instant, my hands are clasped to the sides of my face, mouth gaping wide open, looking very much like that _The Scream_[2]. All of the blood drains from my face as I take in the almost unbelievable situation I see before me.

"What's wrong, Maine?" asks Fey, standing in front of me.
"Y… you stepped on them! They're all… squished!! W… waaaaaah!!"

The first half, the entire first half, of the story that I had so carefully and painstakingly written out, has been squashed completely out of shape by the bootprints of Fey and his friends. They're unrecognizable as tablets anymore, and of course the writing on them is completely illegible.

"I… I just finished that… after so much work… this!" I hiccup, barely choking back my tears. "Don't you know how much effort I've put in to finally make it out here?! I put so! much! time! into trying to make this absurdly frail body strong enough to do this, pushed myself through all sorts of pain, and I really thought… Aaah, I even dragged Lutz and Tory into this too, and still! I finally finished this, I finally got it done, and then what?! Is there anything in that skull of yours? Is your hair pink because your brain is stuffed full of flowers?! Idiot! Idiot idiot idiot! Waaaaaaaah!!"

I break down crying in such a ridiculous emotional display that I, who is supposed to have the mental stability of an adult, should be ashamed of. I can't stop sobbing, I can't stop my tears from falling. If you put my supposed emotional maturity aside, though, this is exactly what a very distressed little girl should look like.

Having heard me scream, Tory rushes over with wide, worried eyes. She quickly asks around to figure what the current situation is, then crouches down next to me, wrapping a comforting arm around me.

"Maine, there's no need to cry like that. They didn't mean to hurt you, you know?"

It doesn't matter if they had ill intentions or not, that's not going to change the fact that my tablets have been smashed into pulp. No matter what Tory says, there's no way it can abate my resentment, my *rage*, over seeing the finished product that I had finally achieved smashed right in front of me.

"No! I'll never forgive them!"

Tears and snot stream down my face, but I lift my head to give a terrified Fey my most threatening glare. Lutz gently pats me on the back.

"You can make them again, right?" he says. "I'll help, and these guys want to make up for this so they'll help too, right?"
"Ah, yeah!" exclaims Fey. "We'll help. I'm really sorry."

Fey and his friends nod vigorously, not disagreeing with Lutz at all.

"…Okay," I say. "I'll make it again."

I was able to make these tablets once, so I'm sure that I'm on the right path. Clay tablets are far easier to make than papyrus, and I'm satisfied with the final result.

However, I make very sure to leave them with a warning.

"There will not be a second time."

If these kids are keeping a list of people not to piss off, I'm pretty sure I just jumped to the top of it.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Hiragana is the most basic syllabary in Japanese. It's the first set of characters taught to students.
2. The Edvard Munch painting.

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018Interlude: Is my daughter a potential criminal?!

My name is Gunther. I'm the lucky husband of my beautiful wife Eva and the proud father of my two adorable daughters, Tory and Maine.

Between my two daughters, Maine is the one who looks most like Eva, but she's going to be even more beautiful than her mother when she grows up. She's surely one of the gods' favorite children. Even her constant illness must be a sign of the gods' love: they adore her so much that they keep trying to call her back.

Maine's the kind of girl who gets sick the instant she works herself even a little bit too hard, but after one particularly bad fever she's started to work on pushing that limit back, bit by bit. She's been saying and doing some strange things, but lately she's been putting a lot of effort into trying to make herself stronger. She used to need to stop and catch her breath after only just going downstairs to leave our building, but over the course of the last three months she's worked so hard that now she can walk all the way to the gate without taking a single break.

She's amazing, right? My daughter's a real go-getter! Don't you agree?

On top of that, she's very, very bright… I think. I can't really say for sure, honestly. It's just that, Otto has always insisted that an assistant would only drag him down whenever I've brought the idea up to him, but when Maine came along, he got very excited and immediately asked if she could be his assistant, so she must be very smart.

According to him, she's so good at math that she was able to spot calculation errors in my squad's financial report just by looking at it, and it looks like she memorized how to write all of the words in our basic statements after just a little bit of teaching. On top of all of that, she has a very logical nature. She's always looking at her surroundings, using her powers of observation to spot tiny little changes that she can make, always thinking about how to further her goals. It seems that Otto is convinced she's absolutely exceptional.

What the hell?

I didn't understand half of what Otto was telling me, but it's easy to see that my daughter is so amazingly smart that she surprised even Otto.

That's my Maine! My amazing little girl. She truly is blessed by the gods.

Today, Maine's heading off to the forest for the first time! I'm on the day shift today, so I'll be here to meet her group when she comes back. I can't help but be worried, though.

"Sir, please calm down," says Otto.
"Hm? Ah, yeah."

She's gotten strong enough to walk to the gates, but is she really going to be able to make it all the way to the forest? If she struggles to make it, there, then she won't be able to rest inside a building like she can here. She'll be stuck outside. Earlier, I suddenly had the worst

idea: what happens if her fever comes back while she's out there in the forest?

"Sir," says Otto again, "we need you to do your job. Please stop staring off into space."
"Oh."
"Are you thinking that Maine isn't going to make it?"
"Otto, you… don't say anything unnecessary!"
"Then, sir, please do your job. She'll be back in the evening, right, sir?"

I'm still annoyed that Maine actually looks up to this impertinent man and calls him "teacher". Well, I know for a fact that she respects me even more. Heh heh heh. After all, when I made her some knitting needles and helped her with the pin for Tory's hair ornaments, she declared that I was the best father in the world! She was definitely not lying.

I go about my work, my subordinates steering clear of me as I restlessly wait for Tory and her group to return. Tory has an amazing sense of responsibility, and she agreed that she'd wrap it up early today, for Maine's sake. Maine is still very weak and still slower than the other kids, so it's conceivable that they'd leave the forest in the afternoon.

The afternoon. It's obvious that they won't have come back by now. I know that.

The sun is starting to dip a little bit towards the horizon, but they still haven't come back. It should be soon, right?

The trickle of people leaving the city for the day has turned into a rush. Still no sign of her?

"Sir," says Otto, "your daughter promised that they would return early, so they're going to be back here soon, is that right? So, *please*, sir, please stop glaring at the travelers. You're scaring everyone."

The number of people entering the city to find an inn for the evening has grown, while the number of farmers leaving the city after finishing selling their grain has shrunk. Still, Tory and Maine haven't come back yet. They should be here any minute now.

They're so slow! You said you would bring everyone back early, Tory! Oh no, did Maine collapse on the way back?!

An image suddenly rushes into my mind. Maine, collapsed on the side of the road, unable to move. Tory, panicking, with no idea what to do. A feeling that I absolutely have to do something seizes hold of me.

"Otto, watch over things here…"
"Sir! Are you abandoning your post?! …O, over there! Isn't that Tory over there?!"
"Where!!"

Otto stands on tiptoes to see over the crowd. He's taller than I am, so he can see all the way back to the end of the line.

"She's right outside the gate, standing at the very end of the line with everyone else. Let's

get move the line as quickly as possible, sir."
"Alright, they're here!"

I move quickly, processing the queue of people waiting to get into the city at lightning speed so that I can get Tory and her friends in as soon as I can. Unlike just a few moments ago, people flow smoothly through the checkpoint, and very soon I can see Tory in the crowd.

This certainly doesn't look like she was at the end of the line! Damn you, Otto! You tricked me!

However, I can't see Maine anywhere nearby. I can't believe that Tory, with her strong sense of responsibility, would just abandon her sister like that, but no matter how hard I look I can't see Maine anywhere.

"Tory, where's Maine?!"
"Lutz stayed behind, they're still on their way. They should be back right before the gate closes, I think."

I immediately look off into the distance, but I can't see Maine or Lutz anywhere. If they're only going to barely make it back in time for the gate to close, then they can't have left the forest early at all.

"You promised you were going to come back here early, right? Is this what you call early?"
"....."
"....."

As I scold Tory, the other kids exchange complicated expressions, as if they're debating whether they should say something or leave it to Tory. It seems like they've decided to keep it to themselves.

"Tory, what happened out—"
She interrupts me before I can finish the question. "A bunch of things. I'll tell you about it later, okay? We're late, so all our moms are going to be worried, too. I want to get everyone home as soon as possible."

Abruptly cutting the conversation short, she starts walking off. The rest of the children follow her into the city, looking incredibly worn out.

"What could have happened out there? Hey, Otto, what do you think?"
"If it was anything serious, they would have asked for help, sir."

He may be talking like nothing could have possibly happened, but if Tory just blows off my questions and can't even give me a simple answer about what happened, I'm going to have questions, you know? I'm going to get worried, you know? Maine! What in the hell happened out there!

I grow more and more restless as the day drags on. Sure enough, right before we start preparing to close the gates, Lutz finally appears, Maine leaning heavily on him, face blue.

"Maine!"
"…Daddy… sorry."

Before I can ask anything, Maine mumbles out a single word of apology, then collapses into my arms. I help Lutz get remove the wicker box (with nothing but a shovel in it) from her back, then pick her up.

"Lutz! What happened out there? Why's she apologizing?"
"Ahh… um, probably, because she made a promise that she didn't mean to keep, I guess? She suddenly started digging a big hole when I had my back turned, then she spent a bunch of time making 'cley tab-luts', then she got super mad at Fey and the others, and then got really worked up… She's probably going to be sick for three days."

Lutz rubs his temples in frustration as he tells me everything that happened. My eyes go wide with shock.

"And you didn't *stop* her?!" I snap.
He looks up at me, resentfully. "Mister, do you really think that me and Tory didn't try?"

That's right. No matter how much I want to pin the blame on him, there's no way that both Tory and Lutz didn't try to stop her. Those two have done a good job of taking care of Maine in the past. Lutz, especially, has spent the last three months helping Maine get home from the gate, and even though they're the same age he looks after her like she's his younger sister.

"Ah… no, sorry."
"Don't get mad at Tory, she really tried her best. Ah, you can probably get mad at Maine, though. I'm mad at her too. …Well," he says, looking at Maine as she lies limp in my arms, "not really, anymore."

It feels like Maine's fever is steadily starting to rise, bit by bit. Her face had been completely pale, but now it's getting redder and redder.

"Take care of Maine, okay?" he says. "I got to catch up with Fey and go home too."
"Yeah, will do. Thanks for keeping an eye on her for me."

As Lutz runs off, I bring Maine into the night duty room and gently lay her down on the bench. Her face is bright red now, and her breathing comes in short, ragged gasps. This bench will have to be a good enough place to rest for now.

I finish up my work as quickly as I possibly can, then carry Maine all the way home.

"Welcome home, Gunther," says Eva. "Did Maine collapse again?"

From her complete lack of surprise, it seems like she expected that this was going to happen. Swiftly, she gets Maine changed out of her outdoor clothes and gets her tucked into bed. I sit down with Tory in the kitchen, hoping to hear her side of the story.

“What happened out there today, Tory?” I ask. “I heard a little about it from Lutz, but I want you to tell me about it too.”

Tory flinches in her chair, a frightened expression on her face as she hears that I already know about what happened. For someone like Tory with such a powerful sense of responsibility, being scolded for a major mistake is one of the most terrifying things out there. To put her mind at ease, I reiterate what Lutz told me.

“Lutz told me that he didn’t want me to get angry at you. I heard that you did your best out there. He also said that I should really be getting mad at Maine, so, could you tell me what happened?”

Now that I’ve told her that I’m not mad, Tory’s look of terror starts to gradually fade away. Her eyes flicker back and forth as she tries to get the words together in her head, then she slowly opens her mouth to speak.

“To be honest, I really don’t know all that much. When we made it to the forest, Maine was about as tired as she usually is, so she sat down on a rock to take a break. Me and Lutz went off to do our gathering. I wanted to finish up quickly, so I thought that I had to hurry, and…” She trails off, worry building on her face again.
“It’s okay, I’m with you so far” I say. It’s easy enough for me to see what happened when they first arrived.
“So I thought to myself, 'it’s probably time to go soon’, but right when I was gathering everything up I heard Maine start screaming. I ran over there as fast as I could, and I saw Maine really, really angry, so angry that she was crying. Fey and his friends apparently destroyed something that she had finally been able to make? She was so mad that I couldn’t calm her down at all, and she kept saying things like 'I’ll never forgive you’, and… Eventually Lutz said something about helping her make everything again, and then she finally started calming down.”

I close my eyes, trying to piece together Tory’s messy explanation. I try to imagine what it would have looked like if I had been there with them.

…I don’t get it. Maine was making *something*, and Fey broke it, so then she threw a tantrum?

“What was Maine making?”
“I don’t know, exactly. I think I heard her call it a 'cley tab-lut’, but… Everyone stopped to help her make them again, so that’s why we were so late.”

I still don’t really understand what exactly happened, but I do know one thing.

“So, what you’re saying is that Maine broke her promise to do nothing but rest once she got to the forest?”
“Huh… um… probably…”

Maine didn’t keep her promise to sit still and arbitrarily went off to make something. That thing got broken, so she got everyone else caught up in making it again, so they spent too long out there before coming back, so she collapsed, so now her fever’s back. There are

limits to how much of a bother someone can be, even if they're Maine.

"I'm not going to let her go to the forest again," I say.
"What?! No! She'll be so mad!"

For some reason, Tory with me disagrees vigorously. It doesn't matter if Maine gets angry, though. *I'm* the one who should be angry, since she made a promise to me and then broke it.

"It's only fair. I can't let a girl who doesn't keep her promises go off to the forest."

I'm going to have to be very strict with her. I can't let her go out only with other kids if she's going to ignore all the rules for doing so and break the promises she makes for her parents' peace of mind. It's too dangerous.

I stand up and start heading towards the bedroom so that I can have a talk with Maine herself, but Tory grabs onto my arm and won't let go. She seems desperate to stop me. I feel bad for her, since she's just trying to look out for her little sister, but I absolutely have to have a talk with Maine.

"Dad, please! Think about it again!"
"My mind's made up. I won't let her go out there again! If she doesn't keep her promises, there's nothing else I can do."

Maine looks up at me as I enter the bedroom, although I don't know if she heard me. Her face is red with fever and her eyes are watery, but she still opens her mouth to speak, though it looks quite painful.

"…Daddy, just one more time. …I'm making *'clay tablets'*."

However, what came out of her mouth was not at all what I expected. She isn't apologizing, she isn't reflecting on what she has done, she's making demands! For some reason, she still wants to go to the forest and keep making something or other. For an instant, I lose my temper.

"What are you thinking?!" I roar. "Absolutely not!"

Maine gives a little sigh, then turns her head to look at Tory, standing next to me.

"…Hey, Tory. …I'll make them at home, so…"
"G… got it! I'll bring them home with me next time."

Wait a minute, Tory. Why are you just accepting this like it's the obvious next step?! Maine, what the hell do you think you're going to be doing in my house?! Also, are you just ignoring how angry I am?!

I spin to face Tory. "You're talking about the thing that made Maine collapse? Like hell I'll let you bring that into my house!"

As soon as the words leave my mouth, Maine's eyes narrow to slits, her expression growing unbelievably cold. Like the flip of a switch, the atmosphere in the room suddenly goes icy.

A strange shimmer of color, like the surface of an oil slick, dances across the gold of her eyes, but it must just be my imagination.

"…Are you serious, Daddy?" she says, quietly, and the incredible pressure of her words sends a shiver down my spine. I take a step back, unintentionally, shocked by the raw intimidation that my own daughter is putting out.

"Ab… absolutely serious!"
"I see…"

Maine looks away, like she's suddenly lost all interest in me.

"Well then… I'm just going to have to do to Fey what he did to my *'tablets'*, then… heh heh…"

A cruel smile spreads across her face, that strange color still shimmering in her eyes. I shiver, again. I feel like I'm drowning in this strange atmosphere, and my breath catches in my throat.

"…Maine?" I say. She starts to chuckle, a dark, terrifying sound.
Tory goes completely pale, like she's seen a monster. "Dad!" she says, shaking my arm, "just say she can go back to the forest!!"
"…Maine," I say again, "what are you thinking about?"
"Hm~mm? …Well, I was thinking of how I was going to make it so that Fey can't go to the forest either. …How, indeed?… …*'Psychological trauma'*…? …So, *'Bancho Sarayashiki'*, then…? [1] …Oh, or maybe *'The Ring'*?"

Her words are broken and nonsensical, delirious from her fever, but her head keeps moving and she keeps mumbling things out, bit by bit. I can't really hear it very well, but it almost sounds like there's a dark, gloomy echo underneath her words. It must be my imagination. Her voice must be a little cracked from the fever.

My little daughter can't be this scary.

"…Why are you talking about Fey, now?" I ask. "He doesn't have anything to do with this."
"Oh, but he does," she says, drawing in a slow, painful breath. "…But I understand what you're saying. …Truly, I understand." She nods slightly, several times.

I might have gotten a little swept away in the strangeness of the moment, but if Maine understands what I was saying, then everything's okay. She's very bright, so I'm sure she understands what she did wrong.

"Ah, okay, if you're reflecting on your actions, then—"
"*I will make them cry.* …Well, I'm going to sleep."
"Maine, wait! You didn't understand at all! Why did you just say that?!"

If she really understood me, then where the hell did “I will make them cry” come from?! Make *who* cry?! Me?! I don’t understand her at all! You’re nearly bringing me to tears, Maine!

“You’re noisy. …Get out.”
“I’m your *father*! Do not make me angrier than I already am!”

Tory pulls hard on my arm, dragging me back into the kitchen. I’ve been ejected from my own bedroom by my two daughters.

“Tory, that was Maine in there, right?”
“I think that was Angriest Maine. Her eyes were sparkling kind of weirdly. When Fey broke her 'cley tab-luts’, she got so mad that she started crying, and the same thing happened. Everyone said it was really scary.”

Ahh, if even I got a little bit scared after that, it must have been absolutely terrifying for those kids.

“She only started to cheer up when we were helping her fix things, so when it was time to go, I couldn’t make myself say it…”
“I see.”

If she was putting out that much pressure, I don’t blame her. Right now, even I really just want to leave her alone.

“When it looked like we’d just barely make it back to the gates before they closed, I begged her to go. Lutz helped, and when he said we’d definitely finish it next time, we finally got her to stop working. Then everyone promised to help her finish it next time, and she said that she’d come back with us.”
“……”

I understand now what Tory was getting at when she tried to stop me just a little while ago. If she had only managed to calm Maine down by telling her that they’d finish up next time, then of course she wouldn’t want me to go in there and tell her that she can never go back.

“Dad, can you let her go just one more time? I think that Fey and the others are really scared of what’s going to happen if she gets mad again. Didn’t she say that she was going to do to Fey what he did to her 'cley tab-luts’?”
“What happened to those, anyway?”

I still don’t understand what a 'cley tab-lut’ is. What the hell kind of thing *is* it?

“Fey and his friends stepped on them and squashed them, so what’s she going to do to them? Is she going to trample them flat?! She said she was going to make sure they couldn’t go to the forest again either, what did that mean? She said she was absolutely going to make them cry! What is she going to do? What is *Fey* going to do?!”

The blood drains from my face as I listen to Tory. Hearing everything Maine had said again is only making me more scared. I wonder, no, I *need to know* what Maine is planning to do. Is… is my daughter about to start committing crimes?

"Tory, what can we do to stop her?"
"I don't know. Try asking Lutz. He was the one who got her to calm down when we were in the forest."

The next day, I pull Lutz to the side as he passes through the gates on his way to the forest and ask him what Maine could have meant. Tory was probably just scared and blew things out of proportion, it's probably not actually that big of a deal, right?

However, Lutz smashes my tiny bit of hope with a cheerful answer.

"A~ah," he says, in a light tone of voice, "she got super mad at Fey and the others, after all. You absolutely can't stop her when her eyes get like that, you know."
"Uh?"
"If she finds even the tiniest chance, she latches onto it like a magic beast. She'll get whatever she wants to get done, done. She's the kind of girl who absolutely finishes her goals. No matter what she has to do, no matter how long it takes."

His eyes glimmer with pride and his chest is puffed up, and he talks like he's enthusing about how awesome Maine is. But, wait a bit, think about this for a second. If a person like that decided that they wanted to *hurt* someone, that would make them a supremely dangerous individual, right? And why is Lutz acting so proud of her? She's *my* daughter, you know?

"Like, say, these 'cley tab-luts'. She wanted to go to the forest, so she spent *three whole months* getting strong enough to get there. She said all of that was so she could make those 'cley tab-lut' things. So, I think that she's definitely the kind of person who'll never give up on what they've set their mind to."
"…Those 'cley tab-luts' were that important to her, huh…"

I had no idea that she'd put that much effort into making those things. It looks like it's not such a simple thing to just ban her from finishing them. Just when I decide that I should probably talk to her about it again, Lutz drops another bombshell.

"A~ah, you know, after she finally made her 'cley tab-luts' only to see them smashed in front of her, and then running out of time before she could finish remaking them, and then getting sick and collapsing on her way back, and *then* being told that she can't go back to the forest and that she can't have any clay in the house either… She's going to blame it all on Fey, for stepping on them in the first place. I really hope they come out of this alive."
"Don't say something so terrifying! Are you saying I've raised a criminal?!"

She said she was going to make them cry, not kill them. It's okay!! …At least, that's what I want to tell myself.

"Eh? Well, maybe you really did, Mister Gunther?"

“Huh? I did?”
“Well, you banned her from going to the forest and making her 'cley tab-luts’, right? Me, I’m terrified of what might happen if she goes at it with all of her might. I wouldn’t dare try to help or hinder her, and I’d never, ever tell her she couldn’t do something.”
“Terrified?”

I blink my eyes repeatedly, trying to process what he’s telling me. No matter how I look at it, Maine is only six years old, though she’s so little she looks like she’s three or four. She’s sickly, frail, short, weak, and slow. I can’t help but think that Maine using all of her strength to do something isn’t actually all that much of a problem. Lutz, though, shrugs his shoulders, continuing to describe why he thinks she’s so scary.

“Because, you know, Maine thinks differently than I do. I don’t know what she’s going to do, where, or how. She might be so weak that I wouldn’t take her seriously if she came at me with a weapon, but that’s not something she’d ever do. I don’t know how, but she’d find and attack their weak points directly, and that’s really terrifying.”

I groan to myself. Lutz is being completely serious here. I hadn’t really thought that what Maine meant by all of her might might have been different than what Lutz or I would mean. I’m scared that I don’t even know how serious she’s going to be. That lack of understanding alone is terrifying.

“A while ago, she even beat my big brother Zeke, like to the point where he was seriously begging her to stop. She told me that strength isn’t everything, and lately, I’ve been beating my big brothers too, sometimes.”

Wait a minute! This is the first I’m hearing about this! How could she possibly beat Zeke? And we’re talking about beating as in “winning”, right?! What has my daughter been *doing*?!

“Hey, Lutz,” I say. “This is a completely honest question: how would you stop Maine from being so angry, if you were in my shoes?”
“Hmmm, I think that I’d find a lot of clay and pile it up in front of her. She seems absolutely fixated on nothing but her 'cley tab-luts’.”

Now that Lutz has described the situation to me, I know what I have to do. In order to preserve the safety of this town and keep my youngest daughter from a life of crime, I’m going to, begrudgingly, have to let her go back to the forest.

When I tell her this, though, she looks very dissatisfied, puffing out her cheeks in frustration.

“…And I’d come up with all of these really good plaaans… and it would be a waste to just let them go, right?”
“Not at all!! Throw whatever schemes you’re plotting out of your head right this very instant!”
“Tsk…”

It seems like she dreamed up some sort of plans to squash Fey flat while caught in her

feverish nightmares. I don't know if it's because she's a little too smart, or just far too angry, but I feel like this was a very close call.

For now, I've stopped Maine from committing any crimes. Fey and the others won't have to face her wrath, and I've protected the peace of this town. I'm very, truly grateful that Lutz told me how I could calm her down.

I breathe a sigh of relief, having put everything back in order, then suddenly gasp as I come to a realization.

Huh? Didn't all this start because she needed to think twice about breaking promises?

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. A Japanese ghost story about broken promises.

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019Clay Tablets: Also no good.

While wracked by feverish nightmare, I dreamed up ways to bury Fey and his lackeys in the icy grip of terror.

I was *so close*! I was so close to finally having a book! But, if I can't go to the forest, and if I can't have any clay brought back to me, then I'll never get my book.

It would seem that this calls for the most traumatic of ideas: classic Japanese horror. I have no solid idea about what the denizens of this world are truly afraid of, but if I let my hair hang down in front of my face like Sadako[1], wear a stained, tattered dress, and stumble towards them while whispering dark curses… or maybe I could count my missing clay tablets like Okiku from *Bancho Sarayashiki*…[2] How about that? That's scary, right?

Even though I had come up with so many good ideas, by the time my fever went down, my father had changed his mind. When I'm finally healthy enough to get out of bed, he tells me that he's lifted the ban on my going to the forest.

"…Tomorrow," he says, with a complicated expression on his face.
"Hm?" I reply, looking up at him.
"You can go back to the forest tomorrow."
"Huh? I can? Why?"
"…You don't seem happy."

I actually really am happy that I can go back to the forest, but this means all of my Japanese horror plans are for naught. I'd been practicing mumbling curses, thinking about how to make my clothes look properly ghastly, and coming up with the perfect times and places to really set the stage for the whole spectacle. I could have stood on the edge of the well, or I could have shuffled out of a dark alleyway…

"I mean, I'm happy, but…"
"But, what?"
"…And I'd come up with all of these really good plaaans… and it would be a waste to just let them go, right?"
"Not at all!! Throw whatever schemes you're plotting out of your head right this very instant!"
"Tsk…"

Well, if I can go to the forest and finish working on my tablets, then my plans aren't really necessary. In fact, it would ultimately be more wasteful to actually go through with them. I no longer have the free time to play around with Fey and the others, so it's obvious that those plans are just going to be automatically discarded.

Nevertheless, what on earth happened to make him change his mind so suddenly?

"I've been keeping an eye on how you're doing, and I think you can go tomorrow. But no sooner!"

It seems that he didn't want me to go because suddenly taking off for the forest while I was still convalescing would have been a terrible idea. I already knew that, though. Nobody in the world knows better than me what a pile of junk this body is.

Today, my fever went down *and* I was given permission to go back to the forest. My heart dances with joy as I work on preparing everything I'll need for tomorrow. In the storage room, I find some sort of board that I might be able to use as a writing desk, and put it in my basket. (What that board is *supposed* to be used for, I don't know.) Then, I grab the entire pile of old rags that my mother uses as cleaning cloths and stuff them in there too. I'll use those to wrap my tablets in for transport on the way home.

Clay tablets! Clay tablets clay tablets clay tablets I'm coming for yooou!!

The next day, I wake up energized and excited, only to be greeted by heavy rain. Not just any heavy rain, even, but a torrential, record-breaking downpour, a storm so fierce that it's practically a typhoon. Even though the shutters on our window are closed, I can still hear the howling of the wind and the pounding of the rain.

"Noooooooo!! Rain?!"

In a world without weather forecasts, thinking about the weather had never even occurred to me. There's been many times where I haven't been able to go outside because my fever was too high or because my family didn't say it was okay, but until now I was never kept indoors by bad weather.

Visions flash through my head of my tablets, pounded by the rain until they're nothing but mud. Even though I had hidden them from the elements under some bushes, that's nowhere close to being adequate protection against a typhoon like this.

Ngyaaaaah! My tablets…! They're turning to droopy mush!!

"Hey, Maine, wait!" yells my mother as I immediately, unthinkingly, dash for the door. She grabs both of my arms and holds them behind me, stopping me in place. "Where do you think you're going?!"
"The forest!" I yell, struggling against her grip.
"Even on the best of days you get fevers far too quickly, so why would you think that going outside in the middle of a storm like this is a good idea?!"

The sound of the wind and the rain pounding ceaselessly at the wooden door reverberates through the house. Just from the noise, it's obvious that this is an extremely violent storm. An ordinary person would hesitate before trying to go out in this, even if it's just to the well, so there's no chance in hell that I'll be able to make it outside at all. Heartbroken, I sit down abruptly, like a puppet with its strings cut.

"My *'clay tablets'*… waaah!"
"It's okay, Maine," says Tory, coming over to comfort me. "Everyone said that they're going to help you this time, so it'll be even quicker and easier than before to make them."

She gently strokes my head as she reassures me that everything's going to be okay. She really is an *amazing* older sister.

The storm is so unusually bad that it lasts for two full days before clearing up, so it isn't until after that that the children got permission to go back out to the forest.

The morning sun shines brightly down from an astoundingly clear sky, and the faces of all of these children that can finally go to the forest shine brightly as well. Today, the apprentices aren't working, so a lot of the bigger kids have joined us as well. We have far more people coming with us today than usual. Ralph, one of Lutz's older brothers, is joining us today. He has an enormous basket strapped on his back, and a bow and a quiver full of arrows hanging at his side.

"Hey, Maine!" he says, cheerfully. "Is your fever doing any better?"
"Good morning, Ralph," I reply. "I got better a little while ago, but as soon as my dad said I was okay to go that awful storm hit."
"That really is awful," he says.

He ruffles my hair, then turns to Tory.

"Hey, Tory," he says.
"Ralph! It's been a while," she replies.

Ralph, looking remarkably more reliable than he did before, maybe because he's been working on his apprenticeship.
Tory, whom I have been carefully polishing in preparation for her baptism, and her radiant smile.

Hey, hey. Don't these two look really good together? They're both really good at taking care of people too, they're a great match.

As I leer at the two of them, Lutz grabs my arm and starts yanking me forward.

"Whoa?!"
"Maine, stop staring off into space. You're the slowest person here, so you've got to be in front when we leave, okay?"
"Oh! Sorry."

I join the mass of children, and we all start walking towards the forest. As we pass through the gate, the green, open fields stretch out before us. The scars left by the storm can be seen here and there, where a few of the fields of crops have been torn to shreds.

Come to think of it, does this world have anything like disaster relief?

I stare blankly off into the distance, my feet moving mechanically beneath me. Lutz sticks his hand in front of my face and waves it back and forth.

"Eh?" I say, blinking. "What's up?"

“Oh, I just was wondering if you were actually watching where you were going. Hey, Maine, you’re going to try making those things again, today? Those 'cley tab-luts’? What are those, anyway?”

Lutz can’t read, so he couldn’t have any idea what I’ve been trying to write down, even if I wasn’t writing in Japanese. More importantly, though, he’s been living a life without written words or even paper at all in his house. He absolutely has no idea about the amazing wonders of permanent media like clay tablets.

I suddenly feel a strange sense of purpose; a desire to proselytize, to spread the good word of the written word.

“Well, so,” I begin, “it’s a thing that I can use to write down things that I don’t want to forget. If you carefully write everything down, you’ll never forget it, you know, because since you’ve written it down you can always go back and look at it again, right? *'Media’* exist for that reason, and my *'clay tablets’* are one kind of *'medium’*. Since it’s made out of clay, and since you can knead and mold clay, if you make a mistake when writing, you can use your finger to smooth it out again and start over. You can bake it when you’re done, if you want it to last forever. It’s amazing, right?”

I don’t know if it’s because of the eloquence of my explanation, but Lutz has his mouth hanging open, head tilted to one side.

“…I don’t get it. …Anyway, what are you trying to write?”
“A story, I’m writing a story. It’s one that Mommy told me, so I want to write it down so that I don’t forget it, you know? What I really want are books, but I can’t get any of those here, so I’m making my own.”
“Ahhh, so is that what you’ve been trying to do?”

Lutz’s question suddenly makes me think. Right now, I don’t have even a single book available to me, so I decided that I needed to somehow make my own. What I really, truly want, though, is not making books.

“Nuh-uh, it’s a little different. What I *really* want is to live a life where I’m surrounded by books. No matter many books are written every month, I want to have all of them, and I want to be able to grow old spending all of my time reading.”
“Ummm, so… you want books…?”
“Yes!! I want them very badly, and I want them right now. But they’re so expensive that I can’t buy them, so they’re way out of my reach. I’ve got no choice but to make them myself, right? Paper is too expensive to buy, so my plan is to make clay tablets, write a story, and then bake it so that I can have it forever.”

At this point, Lutz claps his hands together, and a moment of understanding flashes across his face.

“So, what you’re doing is making a substitute for a book?”
“Yeah! I’ve failed a lot of times so far, so this time I’m absolutely going to make this a big

success."
"Ah! Okay, I'll help out too."

For whatever reason, Lutz has become so cooperative because I had some ideas about cooking. I kind of want to help him out a little, too.

"So, Lutz, what do you want to do? You've heard what I want to do, but do you have anything that you really want to do?"
"I… hmm! I want to try going to other towns. If I become a trader or a minstrel, then I could go a lot of places, and hear a lot of stories, right? There's a lot out there I want to see."
"That sounds nice…"

Come to think of it, back in Japan, I also used to dream of spending my life traveling to the great libraries of foreign countries and reading all of their books. As visions of my unfulfilled dreams unfold in my head, my gaze drifts off into the distance.

"…You really think so?" he asks. "About wanting to leave this town?"
"A~ah, traveling is good too! Traveling around, going here and there, that sounds fun. I always used to dream about traveling, visiting all sorts of *'libraries'* all over *'the world'*…"
"Ah, I was worried you'd think I was being ridiculous. …If it's something you want to do, Maine, I'm sure you're going to make it happen."
"You too, Lutz. I think you can do it if you try."

My mind is so crammed full of the countless dreams I had back when I was Urano that I'm far too preoccupied to notice whatever expression Lutz is wearing on his face right now.

By the time we arrive at the forest, the packed dirt of the road has almost finally dried. We quickly pick a large clearing on the edge of the forest as a good meeting spot.

"Okay, let's get started gathering," says one of the older children. "Little kids, don't go too far from here. Make sure you can always see this clearing, okay?"

The older kids take out their bows and arrows, and take off deeper in the forest. The younger kids hesitate, glancing nervously at me. I may be exhausted just from walking all the way here, but I immediately start looking around the area, worried about the state of my clay tablets.

"Hey, does anyone remember where we put my *'clay tablets'*?"

I can't find the tree we put a mark on the last time we were here. It's already been quite a few days since I was here last, so I've already forgotten, but everyone's looking around restlessly, troubled looks on their faces.

"We marked a tree somewhere over there, right?" says Fey, pointing off into a distance. Immediately, all of his lackeys start nodding. I had a hunch that that direction was where we needed to be looking, but the storm had knocked down so many trees that it was hard to be sure.

“That’s about where it was, so I guess we just need to start looking around there,” says Lutz, bending down to start looking through some of the bushes. Everyone else starts bustling about together, searching here and there.

It’s not just Fey and his lackeys, *everyone* is helping search… wow, these are all some really good kids, aren’t they?

“Hey,” says Fey, squatting down low beside a bush. “Isn’t this it?”

Our landmark had been broken apart, so it had been difficult to find, but Fey waves his hand at me, beckoning me over. I rush over with every scrap of speed I can muster to take a look. All I see is a misshapen lump of earth, with vague hints of ruined, illegible characters. Just as I expected, it’s all soggy and muddy, and you can’t really even make out that there were words carved into them at all. My tablets have returned to being just lumps of clay.

Ah… back to square one again…

“It… it wasn’t my fault this time! I found them like this!” exclaims Fey, hurriedly.
“…Yeah,” I reply, though it’s obvious what happened even if he didn’t say anything.

I know that it’s not his fault. I know that everyone around me is asking what’s going on or wondering what they should do. I know that this is something that I had known was going to happen. Still, I can’t stop the tears streaming down my face.

As tiny sobs leak out of me despite my better efforts, I hear footsteps come up behind me. They come up right beside me, and a hand is placed lightly on my head.

“Maine,” says Lutz, “if you’ve got enough time to cry about it, you should use that to make some new ones instead.”

His words snap me back to reality. That’s right, it’s just like he says. I’m finally back out here, with Fey and his friends here to help me rebuild them. I sniff, wiping the snot from my nose off with my sleeve, and lift my head.

As if I’d give up here!

My first defeat was under the boots of Fey and his disastrous lackeys. My second defeat was at the hands of time, cutting me off with the closing of the gates. My third defeat was by the howling storm.

I have fought through man-made calamity and natural disaster! There can’t possibly be anything left that can stop me now. I am going to complete these tablets at any cost.

It may be the case that my clay has turned into a shapeless blob, but I can knead and mold it back into flat tablets again. If I don’t have enough, then I remember where I can go to get more. This isn’t square one. Square one was when I was scratching at the dirt with my blunted wooden shovel, fruitlessly searching for clay in the wrong spot. This is way different.

Everything's going to be fine.

What I've learned from my mistakes so far is that I either need to finish these in a single day while the weather is still clear, or relocate to someplace with a roof, otherwise this whole thing is futile. We've been blessed by beautiful skies today, and I have three strong, healthy helpers on top of Lutz and Fey to assist me. Whether it's because my tears and rage were effective at guilting them into helping, or whether they're just really eager, I don't know. Either way, with even more people helping me out then there were before, it's definitely going to take far less time to finish.

"It's okay, Tory," I say, "you can go work on gathering. I've got Lutz, Fey, and the others helping me."
"Got it. …Good luck, everyone!"
"Yeah!"

Tory's encouragement helps me pull myself back together, and I get started on once again remaking my clay tablets. Fey and one of his lackeys work on digging out more clay from the ground, then the other two lackeys work with Lutz to knead the clay and form it into the right shape for me. As for me, I've found a slender twig and am carefully carving my story into the surface of the first tablet.

Yeah, yeah! I'm feeling great about this!

"I'm going to need about ten *'clay tablets'* to finish writing my story," I say, "so once you've made ten of them, go do your gathering work. Thanks!"
"O… okay!"

One after another, clay tablets are quickly dug up, molded, and lined up next to me. After swiftly finishing ten of them, Fey and the others don't hesitate to race off into the forest.

Lutz, however, stays behind, and starts digging up more clay.

"Lutz, you're not going with them?"
"Ralph's here today, so I'm going to stay here and help you!"
"Hmm! Well, I've already got enough clay, so do you want to practice writing?"

On a patch of dirt still soft from the rain, I use my stick to write out "Lutz" in the local alphabet.

"What's that?" he asks.
"That's your name! If you can't even write your own name, you won't be able to go visit other towns, you know?"

Our town basically allows us to walk freely in and out of the gates because they know who we are, but if we try to go to other towns, they'll ask us for our names and want them written down. That's what Otto, a former trader, told me. At our gates, the entry lines for people from other towns are actually separate from those for people from our town, and the checks are much more strict for outsiders. If Lutz wants to travel to other towns

someday, he should at least know how to write his own name.

"So, this is how you write my name?"
"Yeah! You know, if you want to travel around, it's a really good idea to learn how to write."

His eyes gleaming, Lutz practices writing his name on the ground over and over. Meanwhile, I continue diligently working on finishing my clay tablets. Carefully, I carve the first story I ever heard in this world into the tablets, in Japanese. With every stroke of my stick, I tell myself that I'm absolutely going to finish my book.

"It's done!!"

I've finished writing out one of the fairy tales my mother told me. Right now, I want to write an anthology, titled something like "Tales My Mother Told Me", filled with all of the bedtime stories that my mother packed into my head ever since I was reborn into this world.

I carefully wrap each of my tablets in the old rags I brought with me. I stack them in my basket, taking great care to move them as slowly as possible so that I didn't risk smudging the words written on them into illegibility.

When I finally have all of them stacked neatly in my basket, I heave an enormous sigh. My eyes grow hot, and tears shimmer on their surface.

This is my first real triumph! To be honest, clay tablets aren't the kind of medium that most people would think of when they're talking about books, but, no matter what *anyone* says, this is the first book I've finally acquired in this new world.

It was at the end of autumn that I was reborn into this world, and now we're approaching the end of spring. It has taken a tremendous amount of time, but I have finally acquired my first book.

"Even in a world like this, I can still read a book," I whisper to myself. "…So, everything's going to be okay."

I was reborn into a world where books are far too expensive for poor people to buy, into the body of a child that can hardly do anything without being stricken with fever. I was fine with doing something reckless, and maybe even dying for it. I'd never once imagined that I'd have the body of such a frail little girl. I'd never even considered that I'd be forced to live out my life in a world without books. I didn't even have a fragment of attachment to this new life.

However, I finally have a book in my grasp. I've finally accomplished the one thing that I truly wanted to do. Now, I have something to live for. Now, I can truly see myself living in this world.

"Maine, you finished it?" asks Tory, returning to the clearing with her pack full.
"Yeah! I'm finished. Thanks to you, and Lutz."

The emotions I'm feeling for Tory and Lutz may be those that Maine felt for them, and not mine, but making this book has truly saved me.

I carefully lift the topmost cloth and show the two of them the finished tablet.

"Hey, Maine," asks Tory, "What did you write on this one?"
"Oh, this is the story of the children from the stars. It's the story that Mommy told me on my first night."
"…Your first night?" she asks, a dubious frown on her face.
"Yeah, this is the first story I can remember."

This is the story that my mother quietly recited to me on that first night, when my fever was so painfully high that I couldn't sleep. Her voice may have been full of love and affection, but it was an affection for someone who was not *me*. Her words and emotions were things I couldn't accept, so they passed right through me, and the feelings of isolation within my disconnected mind only grew deeper.

Despite this, as soon as I decided that I was going to make a book in this world, I immediately knew what it was going to be about. If I capture her bedtime stories in my precious, first book, then I feel like I might truly be able to accept her love.

"I don't want to forget her story at all, so I made sure to write all of it out here so that it'll never go away."
Tory smiles, seeming a little bit anxious. "But, it can still be erased, right?"
"If I leave them like this, yeah, but when I bake them, they'll get hard, and then you can't erase them anymore. Then, once I do that, I can always read Mommy's stories."

It's been almost half a year since I started living here, but this is the first time I've ever had an honest, genuine smile.

…This would be an excellent happy note to end my story on, but it does not, of course, end here.

As soon as I returned home, I baked my tablets in our oven. They exploded. No, really. They exploded. I don't know what you're trying to tell me, but I'm not lying.

While they were baking in the oven, there was a boom, and the first book I had ever written flew out of the oven in a cloud of dust and chunks of dirt.

I didn't even have the time to investigate why. First, I was too dumbfounded to ask, then my mother scolded me for quite some time, then she made me promise that I wasn't going to do anything like that again.

Huh? Doesn't this mean that I'm actually, completely back to square one now? Ah, wait, no, it still feels like I actually finished something, so… three steps forward, two steps back, maybe?

…What the hell do I try next?

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. The specter from The Ring.
2. A classic Japanese ghost story. Okiku, the vengeful spirit in the story, is obsessed with finding the missing plate from her collection, which was lost and/or broken through treachery.

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020Tory's Baptismal Ceremony

Ahh… if only I could have successfully baked my clay tablets. That would have been great. I never even imagined that they might explode.

If I had a knife like Tory's, then at least I might be able to make *mokkan*.[1]

After that tiny little explosion in the stove, I was forever banned from trying to make clay tablets again. I'd completely run out of book-making plans, so I was only left to ponder what my next method could possibly be. In the meantime, Tory turned seven years old.

Here, it's customary for your seventh birthday to be an enormous celebration. More accurately, it's not the precise birthday that's being celebrated, but instead the season in which you were born. Every season, there is a large baptismal ceremony at the temple, where every child who has turned seven gather to be baptized. Afterwards, the children are able to start working as apprentices, and it seems like that's when they start getting counted as part of the town's population.

For whatever reason, it makes me feel kind of weird to think about religious ceremonies, but if I think of it like _Shichi-Go-San_[2], then it doesn't bother me at all. Strange.

Children under the age of seven aren't allowed to enter the temple, so my father and I aren't participating. Incidentally, while I already knew for a while that I wasn't going to be able to attend, my father's absence was forced on him abruptly. Due to some twist of unfortunate luck, he has been summoned for a meeting that he absolutely cannot get out of, on the very day of his oldest child's baptism. On top of that, this is a meeting convened by some very high-ranking members of the aristocracy, so if he didn't attend, his superiors might have his head. *Literally*.

Scary!

Despite that, my father has been sitting here since early morning, issuing complaint after complaint, seemingly in no hurry to actually head out for work.

"No… I don't want to go to this stupid meeting! It's Tory's baptism, you know? Why'd someone have to schedule this pointless meeting on this really important day?"

It's very true that today is an important day. I'm sure that aristocrats have children too, so if they also go to get baptized then they should have been well aware of exactly when the ceremony is supposed to take place.

"Huh?" I say, puzzled. "Do the nobles not baptize their kids like we do?"
"…They don't go to the temple to do it, they call the priests out to their houses. So, they don't understand how we feel in the lower classes."

Last night, I was able to ignore him, since I figured it was better for him to get his complaints off his chest while he was still at home, but this man is *obstinate*. Perhaps it's a trait

common to fathers in every world who love their daughters that they feel this anguished and depressed whenever they miss their daughter's track meet or recital?

I sigh as I carefully comb Tory's long hair out to the sides. "Daddy, we can all go out together, so you need to get ready to go to work! You can walk Tory to the temple, you know. Anyway, only the kids can enter the temple today, so you'd just be waiting in the courtyard, right?"

I think he'll cheer up a little bit if he can lead Tory to the temple and see her standing in line, all dressed up in her beautiful new clothes. Even though I've offered him a good suggestion, he still continues to ramble meaninglessly.

"But it's a father's duty to wait in the courtyard…"
"I thought it was a father's duty to go to work for their family, though?"
"Ngh!"
"Is going to work with me really so awful? You're going to go alone, then!"

I push him away, acting like I've lost all ability to care. He turns to me with pleading eyes brimming with tears, seemingly about to start crying at any moment.

"…No, I'll go with you. As soon as the meeting's over, we'll come back, because everyone's going to be celebrating tonight…"

Tory looks over at our father and smiles brilliantly, keeping her head as still as she can so that I can continue weaving her hair.

"Hey, Dad. I get it, already! You're going to come back and celebrate with us, right? I'm really looking forward to it, so come back soon, okay?"
"…Yeah!"

With a single sweet smile, my father's mood suddenly skyrockets. I mentally applaud Tory's results. You truly are our angel, Tory.

"Maine," she says, "keep an eye on Dad to make sure he gets his work done today."
"Leave it to me! I'll do my best, so you don't need to worry about that all on your baptism day!"
"Hey, Maine!" objects my father. Tory starts laughing out loud.

Yeah, that's a great smile. It seems like Tory won't be lonely, even if our father can't come to her baptism ceremony, since she's so appreciative of our father's oppressive love.

"All done," I say. "…Yeah, Tory, you're super cute."
"Thanks, Maine."

I've combed her hair out, separating it to either side, then braided some of the hair on each side back into a half-up style, which I then finished off with her hairpin. The hairpin is something that I made this past winter, using the same colors of thread that were used in the embroidery on Tory's dress to make a bouquet of tiny lace flowers. The multicolored

flowers on the pins match Tory perfectly, giving her a cheerful yet sweet sort of air.

"Well, Tory," says my mother as she walks into the room, "You're looking very beautiful."
"Huh… Mom?"

My mother has dressed up for today, since she'll be going to the temple with Tory. She's wearing her only nice dress, a simple, pale-blue affair whose hem falls all the way down to her ankles, just barely letting you see her shoes. I never thought that she could become so beautiful just by changing her clothes and scrubbing away the red stains from crushing seeds at the dyery.

My mother's got some raw potential underneath all that. She's seriously beautiful.

"Mommy, come sit over here," I say.
"I'm fine as I am," she replies. "The way you do up hair is very beautiful, Maine, but also very extravagant. I don't want to draw any attention to myself today; it's the children who should be playing the leading roles."
"Ahh, okay."

It's not like I can really use any ornaments, so I personally wouldn't think that my hairstyling is particularly extravagant, but if my mother says so I guess it must be true. I don't really know what counts as dressing up around here, but it's definitely possible that I could overdo it.

I hop down from the chair I'd been standing on as I worked on Tory's hair. "So, let's go!"

I grab my tote bag with the things I'll need to take with me to the gate, then head out the door with my dressed-up sister. My mother, Tory's chaperone for the day, follows close behind, accompanied by my father, dressed in his work clothes.

Typically, my mother walks at a very brisk pace, even when carrying a lot of things, but today she steadily, carefully climbs down the stairway, holding the hem of her dress up so that it doesn't drag as she walks. Tory hitches up her skirt a little bit as well, mimicking our mother, taking the stairway one steady step at a time. Since I'm in my usual clothing, I don't care at all, and I actually manage to make it to the bottom of the stairs a step ahead of everyone else.

"Whoa…"

A great many people are milling about outside in the plaza around the water well. It seems like everyone's showing up to congratulate the children who are heading off to their baptisms. I can see Ralph and Lutz in the crowd, despite the fact that I'm pretty sure they have nothing to do with today's ceremony. Everyone seems to be here to give their well wishes to today's stars.

I'm sure there were still ceremonies in the winter and the spring, but back then I really didn't have much strength to leave the house very often, so this is the first time I'm seeing all of this first-hand.

“Fey, congratulations,”
“You’re looking pretty manly!”

It seems like pink-haired Fey is having his baptism today as well. Similar to Tory, he’s wearing a white outfit with an embroidered sash. His sash is green, though, and looped around his shoulder.

…Ah, I see. Being able to sew really is important.

Since everything around here is hand-made, relative differences in your skills can have a very noticeable effect. In Japan, being good at sewing was really never particularly useful, and everyone here always wears beat-up rags, so even though my mother had told me that being good at sewing was an important skill for a beautiful woman to have, it never really clicked with me until now.

I didn’t have anything to compare my mother’s sewing skill to, but now that I’m seeing the other kids’ clothes, she really is amazing at it. Enough to brag about it, even. As for me, it’s becoming clear that it won’t be at all possible for me to find a lover, let alone get married.

“Ahh, Tory! You’re amazingly cute!” cries Carla, her voice booming through the plaza and her hands clapped to the sides of her face as she praises Tory. Everyone’s attention is immediately drawn to Tory, and they start heaping congratulations on her.

“Congratulations, Tory!”
“Your hair is so beautiful, just like a nobleman’s daughter!”

Carla continues to lavish praise on Tory, who gives her an embarrassed smile in return. Unlike all of the other children, Tory’s hair cuticles are very healthy, so her blue-green hair is glossy. Between the white dress my mother is so proud of and the halo of light reflecting off of her hair, she looks positively angelic.

My Tory really is an angel. I think I can understand why my dad dotes on her so much.

“Maine worked really hard to braid my hair,” she says.
“Huh, she did?” asks Carla. “I guess she has another redeeming feature beyond her unusual recipe ideas.”

Carla, you’re so mean. I breathe a sigh of relief, though: there’s at least one thing that this worlds think that I’m good for.

“This is really complicated. How did you do it up like that?”
“Let me see, let me see!”

Regardless of age, an army of women has formed around us, trying to get a good look at Tory’s head.

Eeeek! This is a really standard hairdo, you don’t need to stare so closely! You people don’t comb your hair our properly, so of course it gets messy when you try to braid it…

“That looks great, Tory!” says one of the younger girls in the crowd, sighing enviously. “I want to do my hair like yours for my baptism this winter.” The crowd around her agrees emphatically, murmuring “me too, me too” in unending waves of sycophancy.

“So everyone wants to Maine to do their hair too?” asks Tory with a delighted smile. She turns to me. “Will you?” I immediately shake my head in refusal. “There’s no way!”
“Why not?” she says, taken aback a little.
“I don’t know when my fever’s going to come up again. You know that this is the first time I could actually go to a baptism, right?”

I feel a little bad for Tory, since all she wanted to do was brag about her little sister, but there’s no way I could braid the hair of a bunch of unknown girls every single time a baptismal ceremony came around. On top of that, I can guarantee that it won’t turn out even close to how Tory’s looks right now. These girls’ hair is like Tory’s was at the start of all this; rough, unwashed, and in dire need of repair. While I had to touch damaged hair like that when I was just starting out, by now I absolutely do not want to have to feel anything like that again.

“Ah, okay. You’ve been doing a little better lately, but your fever really does still come back unexpectedly. I was just trying to boast a little about my little sister, that’s all.”

I’m trying to give off the impression that I really want to agree to Tory’s offer despite the fact that I’m such a fundamentally useless burden. Honestly, though, doing that would be psychologically impossible for me.

“…I can still show everyone else how to do their hair like I did yours. I just don’t want to promise everyone that I’ll do it for them, that’s all.”
“Yeah, yeah, like Dad was just telling you the other day, don’t make promises you can’t keep. Hey everyone, Maine said that she can show everyone how to do their hair like mine!”

Tory seems satisfied with the compromise I came up with for her suggestion, so it seems that the plaza in front of the water well is going to become a hairdressing classroom at some point in the future.

I never would have thought, even for a second, that braided hair could draw this much attention. No wonder my mother didn’t want me to do hers as well.

“Hey,” says one of the girls, “what about that hairpin? Who made that?”
“Maine!” replies Tory. “Nuh-uh,” I say, “the whole family did! Me and Mommy made the flowers, and Daddy made the pin part of it.”
“Ahh, that’s right,” she says.

My mother, who is very skilled at sewing, didn’t know about lacework. It seems that it really is very rare to see it here. All of the older woman immediately pounce on me.

“Hey, Maine. Do you think you could teach me how to do that?”
“Showing you how is easy, but if you don’t have really tiny needles you can’t do it, you know? Also, I think it might be better for Mommy to show you how to make it, she’s way

better at it."

I'm already bad at talking to strangers. On top of that, there's a good chance that I might say something really weird, since I lack a lot of the common knowledge people around here should know. As a result, I really don't know what I should be saying to these women. I think the best way to interact with my neighbors is probably to keep them at arm's reach.

Da-dong, da-donnng ring the bells of the temple. Whenever the bells in the center of the temple ring, the sound echoes throughout the entire town. In an instant, every flapping mouth in the plaza snaps shut. In the next instant, someone in the crowd yells out, "Time to go, people! To the main street!!"

With the children to be baptized leading the way, we head out towards the main street in groups. At the same time, other groups of children appear from the other alleyways here and there, followed by more groups of spectators. From the edges of the town to the gates of the temple, the procession gathers in the main streets, with the children in their white clothes at the head and their chaperones close behind. The rest of the people line the sides of the streets, seeing their children off as they join the crowd.

This scene really reminds me of, well, you know.

People, cheering and waving, are lined up by the sides of the road while a procession makes its way through the streets. Even if you can't see where the procession is, you can hear the roar of the crowd swell as it grows closer to you. It really reminds me of the New Year Ekiden.[3]

Starting from far away, I hear the cheering gradually grow closer and closer. When the procession is almost right on top of us, I glance over at Tory. She seems nervous, standing there with a stiff expression on her face. I reach up with my index finger, standing on my tiptoes as high as I can go, and poke her in the cheek.

"Huh?" she says, her eyes going wide. "What was that for?"
"Smile, Tory! You're the cutest girl in the whole world when you're smiling. It's true, you know!"

After a moment, her wide eyes slowly crinkle up as her usual radiant smile spreads across her face.

"Ugh, come on, Maine," she says, in mock exasperation.
"Hey now," says my father, "even when she's not smiling she's the cutest girl around."

What do I do about this man?

As we banter back and forth, the procession comes into view. Loud cheers, applause, and whistles fill the street around me as countless children, dressed in white, parade down the street towards the temple. Some of them are beaming, some have stiff expressions, some walk proudly, and some look very nervous.

Tory and Fey each take a step forward, leaving the crowds of spectators lined up on the side of the streets. They lightly walk towards the stream of children as they pass by, joining the line of children at the very end. Once we see that they've made it into the line, Fey's family and my family both step forward to join the procession as well.

At every bend in the main street, another few children join the crowd. At this rate, I don't even have the slightest idea how many we'll have by the time we finally get to the temple at the center of town.

Even though we're still just walking towards the temple, there's already some parents that are so deeply moved that they've burst into tears. Such as my father.

I follow the procession through the thunderous cheers, halfway jogging to try and keep up. Voices ring out from everywhere around me, so I curiously look around the area as best as I can. People watch us from the windows of the houses that line both sides of the street, some of them throwing tiny white flowers from some unknown plant down on us as some kind of blessing. The flowers thrown from the highest windows drift down gently, almost seeming like they're falling straight from the clear blue skies. The children at the front of the procession start laughing excitedly. I can't see much through the crowd, since I'm far shorter than everyone else around me, but I can see the hands of the children reaching up towards the sky, perhaps to try to catch the flowers as they fall.

At the large fountain that sits in the middle of the intersections between two main streets, the procession comes to a brief stop. Another group of children, who followed a different path to get here, meets up with ours, and the crowd starts to swell. This is as far as my father and I can go.

"Daddy, come on, this way," I say, pulling on his hand. It seems like he's intent on following the procession all the way to the temple, but I grab tightly onto his hand and try to lead him away. I drag him out of the way of the procession to the side of the streets where the sight-seers are standing, and we join them in seeing off the procession as they resume their path towards the temple.

"Tory…" sobs my father, gazing forlornly off in the direction of the temple.
"Ugh! Daddy, come on!"

Now that the procession has passed, the crowd of people is starting to thin out as people head back to their homes. I turn us around to follow the crowd, heading back in the direction of the south gate. My father, however, keeps stopping to look back to where the procession has gone, lingering regret in his eyes, leaving me wondering if we're going to actually make it to his meeting on time.

"Squad Leader! You're late!" says Otto, glaring angrily at my father as we finally reach the gate. Otto quickly ushers him into the meeting room, leaving me, as usual, to sit down and practice writing on my slate.

It looks like, starting today, I'm going to be learning the names of the goods on the wagons that come in and out of the town, so that I can eventually read the merchants' cargo manifests. These words are actually the first words I've learned from Otto that are actually usable in daily life. Today, all of the words that I'm learning are the names of vegetables that are in season.

There's a lot of vegetables that I know about already, like "pomay" (the tomato that looks like a yellow pepper), "vel" (a kind of red lettuce), "foosha" (a green eggplant), and so on. Since I know about these, they're easy for me to remember, but there's also a lot of them that I haven't actually seen on our dinner table. Those will take some more time to memorize.

I really want to head over to the market so that I can match these names to what they look like… but I don't think I can stomach another encounter with the butchers' shops.

As I sit there, alone, slate pencil clacking on slate, one of the younger-looking soldiers bursts into the room, holding some sort of document.

"Do you know where Otto is?" he asks.
"I think he's in a meeting today." I reply.
"Ah, that's right! Now what do I do…"

It looks like today's gatekeeper isn't particularly good at reading official documents.

"Want me to read it for you?" I ask, holding out my hand.
"Huh? *You?*" he asks, looking at me with an incredibly dubious expression on his face.
"I can try; I *am* Otto's assistant."

I can understand his skepticism; after all, I look like a little girl, not the kind of person you'd expect to be able to read important paperwork. I'm used to seeing that expression by now. I really only offered out of the goodness of my heart, so if he doesn't want to take me up on my offer I don't particularly care either way.

He doesn't react at all to my offer, so after a few seconds I turn my attention back to my slate and continue practicing writing out characters.

"…You can read it?" he asks after a brief pause.

My confidence in my reading ability actually depends a lot on what kind of document it is. I can't yet say that I've memorized everything.

"Umm, if it's a letter of character reference or a aristocratic introduction letter then I can read it. If it's a merchant's cargo manifest then I can read the numbers but not all of the words."
"Ah, well, this is an introduction letter. Could you please?"

These aristocratic introduction letters are written in an unnecessarily overcomplicated style, making them a huge bother to read, but once you clear past all of the flowery language the

meat of the document is actually very simple. All you really need to know is who is referring whom to whom, and whose seal is needed on the document.

I unroll the document, taking a deep breath of the smell of parchment and ink, then scan my skillful eye over the text within.

…Ahh, the leading private is in a meeting right now. This is a lower-ranking nobleman's introduction, so it'll be fine to make him wait until the meeting's over, right?

"Umm, this is a letter of introduction from Baron Bron, and the bearer is going to see Baron Glatz. This needs the leading private's seal."[4]

I hand the document back to the soldier, trying to remember how Otto did his job. If I've got the interaction manual in my head right, I can at least do things like this.

"Please ask the merchant who brought this letter to wait in the waiting room for lower-ranked nobility. Today's meeting was called by a high-ranking nobleman, so they'll have to wait until the meeting is over before the leading private can apply his seal. If you explain this properly, I don't think the Baron's guest will be unreasonable."
"Thanks. You're a lifesaver!"

He salutes me, tapping his chest twice with an upturned fist. I hop down off of my chair, face him, and return his salute. As Otto's assistant, it's only natural for me to be able to do these kinds of things.

Hmmm, at this rate, I'm going to wind up finding work as whatever equivalent this place has to a clerk, it seems…

I'd been thinking that I'd have figured out how to make paper before I started my apprenticeship next year so that I could start a bookstore, but things aren't really turning out like how I envisioned. Reality is pretty crushing, sometimes.

I continue practicing writing out words on my slate for a long time before my father, finished with his meeting, suddenly bursts into the room.

"We're leaving, Maine!" he says.
"Ah, a little wh—" I start to say.
"Let's talk while we're walking," he interjects, cutting me off. "Tory is waiting!"

My father stuffs my slate and pencil into my tote bag, picks me up piggyback, and starts walking briskly home.

"Daddy?! Um! I have to repo—"
"Let's get out of here before Otto catches us."
"Wait!! I have to give Mister Otto a report!"

As we quarrel, Otto catches up with us.

"Oh! Mister Otto! A merchant is here, with a letter of introduction from Baron Bron to Baron Glatz. The leading private was in the meeting, so I had him wait in the lower-ranked nobility waiting room. Please take care of him quickly!"
"As expected of my assistant! Great job, Maine."
"She's my daughter."
Otto sighs and rubs his temples in response. "I'd only entrust such an important task to such an excellent assistant," he says to me. "This squad leader here should go home immediately. Thanks to his constant fidgeting during the meeting, the high-ranking noblemen there were glaring at me! I think I lost years off of my life."
"Daddy, life is important," I say.
"Look, you heard it from Otto too: we're heading home."

His heart is absolutely set on returning home immediately, so he carries me all the way home as quickly as he can.

In the evening, we throw Tory a birthday party. My image of a proper party involves cake as a very crucial element, but we don't have anything like that in this house. So, after taking a look at our ingredients, I decided that I'd make some pseudo-french toast.

I took a loaf of hard multi-grain bread and had my mother cut it into thick slices, then took advantage of the fact that Lutz's family really appreciated my recipes to get some eggs and milk from them. My mother finished everything off by frying each slice in butter. We don't have sugar, honey, or anything like that, so I garnished it with a bit of jam made from some sort of raspberry-like berry.

I was able to do one more thing for Tory: I cut up the vegetables in the soup into cute shapes, like hearts and stars. She seemed very pleased by this.

"Here, Tory," says my father, "we have a present for you."
"Whoa… Dad, Mom, thanks!"

They've given her new work clothes, as well as the tools she'll need for her job. Now that she's seven years old and has had her baptism, she'll be starting her apprenticeship. While there are some live-in jobs available, Tory's work as a seamstress will not be one of them, so she'll be commuting back and forth.

Aha, she has her sights set on getting good at sewing and becoming a beautiful woman. She wants Ralph to call her a good girl. I understand completely.

"You're not working every day, right?" I ask.
"Well, when I'm just starting out, I'm not going to be able to do all that much, so I'll only be there about half the week."
"If they spend every day teaching apprentices, then they'll never get anything done, after all," explains my mother.

Certainly. I've experienced that first hand: on days when the apprentice soldiers have to be

taught writing and math, I don't get any of my own studying done, and Otto's work only piles up further.

"And now this is for you, Maine."

With a heavy clunk, my parents place a long, thin object, wrapped in cloth on the table in front of me. I blink my eyes, doubtfully tilting my head to one side. It wasn't *my* baptism today, so I'm not sure why I would be getting a present as well.

"But it wasn't my baptism today?"
"Since Tory's going to be going to work, you'll be in charge of going out and collecting firewood. You'll be needing this."

I unwrap the cloth, revealing a knife, dully gleaming in the candlelight. Its blade is thick, and when I heft it in my hands I can feel its considerable weight. In Japan, it would be unconscionable to give something so dangerously sharp to a young child, but common sense here dictates that a child that doesn't have something like this can't even defend herself, a baby that can't help out or do anything useful.

They really gave me a knife.

Up until now, they've really been totally treating me like a baby. Tory was assisting the family, but I was only Tory's assistant. Or, would it be more accurate to say that I was a burden that only did unnecessary things? However, now that Tory is starting her apprenticeship, it seems like I too must start to carry the proverbial knife.

But, now I've got a knife! I can make *mokkan*!
I'm going to make *mokkan*!!

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Mokkan are thin, narrow wooden tablets that were used for keeping records in historical Japan. The Japanese term is what's used in academic literature on the subject, so I'm leaving it as-is.
2. A Japanese festival for seven, five, and three-year olds, which is generally considered a kind of coming-of-age ceremony. The name literally translates to "seven-five-three".
3. The New Year Ekiden is a long-distance relay race held every New Year between teams from major Japanese corporations.
4. "Leading Private" is a military rank. In the US Army, the equivalent rank it Private First Class.

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021I'm Making Mokkan!

Today is the first day of Tory's new apprenticeship, and I have been seriously panicking. The responsibilities that have been thrust on me are things that I'm almost surely incapable of actually doing. I was thinking that I could use all of my modern-day knowledge to make up for my other deficiencies, but none of that knowledge is actually the slightest bit applicable.

Tory was seriously amazing as an older sister.

First of all, I can't fetch water. I can't even pull it up from the well! I lack the necessary strength. On top of that, even though I can only draw up a little to begin with, hauling it up the stairs is extremely difficult as well. If I wanted to get a single bucket's worth of water up to my home, I need to make five trips. Our household, however, doesn't need just one bucket of water. I need to fill up our entire jug. When my mother helps me fetch the water, she manages to fill the jug in about the same amount of time it takes me to fill just one bucket.

I'm useless.

When it comes time to start preparing lunch, I need to light the fire in the stove. When I was still in school, we went on class camping trips, so I know how to stack logs for making a fire. You stack the fat fuel logs with the slender, easier-to-burn kindling in a way that air can easily pass through, then use some sort of tinder, like dry grass, that catches sparks and burns hot and quick. *That*, I can do.

However, I can't actually light the fire. When I went camping, we had lighters. Here, we have flint, which I have no idea how to use at all. I watched Tory do it once, then later tried to mimic what she did.

"Wha–?!"

When I struck the two chunks of flint against each other as hard as I could, sparks flew out, as could be expected. The flash of glittering sparks right before my eyes caused me to flinch back in shock, dropping both stones to the floor. Ever since then, I've been afraid that those sparks might burn me like the sparks from fireworks, so I haven't been able to muster up the courage to strike them together hard enough to spark. Eventually, my mother wound up doing it.

I'm really useless.

If it's helping out with cooking prep work, I can do at least that… or so I thought. However, the kitchen knife is so heavy that I have to use both hands to lift it. Plus, when I look at the trussed-up birds we need to prepare, I freeze up. All I can really do is chop up the ingredients that I can use a smaller knife on and provide recipe ideas. There's very little else I can actually do in the kitchen. I'm so short that I can't even stir things around in a frying pan, even if I'm given a stool to stand on. My mother really does praise me on my recipes, but my lackluster contributions only serve to make me increasingly depressed.

I'm *seriously* useless.

Tory arrives home from her first day at work to find me sitting in the corner, a dull, depressed look on my face. "What's wrong, Maine?" she asks.

I'm too depressed to even answer, so my mother does so for me. "…She tried to help out today, but couldn't do very much at all. I think she's depressed about how little she could actually do."
"Huh? Now?"

Yes, Tory, now. It may have taken some time, but I finally realized it. I am completely worthless.

"…I tried to do so many different things, but I couldn't do any of them at all," I mumble.
"Well, we know what your condition is," says my mother reassuringly, "so as long as you're trying your best it'll be alright, right?"
"Also, there's nobody better at cleaning than Maine!"

I have some experience pushing a broom and wiping things down; those are things that I can manage to do even if I only barely have the strength to do it. If I put too much power into it, though, my fever comes back immediately. Also, my constant cleaning efforts are not done because I want to help the family out. I'm doing it because I absolutely cannot stand living in such a filthy environment. It's for my own sake, not my family's.

In modern Japan, where we have machines to do all of the heavy work for us, I could clean, do laundry, and cook from start to finish, all by myself. Here, however, I can't do any of that at all. Honestly, I didn't think that it would be anywhere near this hard. Tory's only a year older than me and she can do it with no problems. I, however, am stuck with this inexplicably weak body, and am just dead weight.

When I somehow got reincarnated, I really would have preferred a much more robust physique. At least, robust enough to not be a hindrance.

"Ahaha, Maine," laughs my father, "are you bothered that much by being useless?"
"…Yeah, I am."
"Well, even if that's the case… I never really had any high hopes to begin with."
"Uh?"

Huh? Why is he saying something so unexpectedly cruel? Why is he *smiling*?

"Well, I think it's a bad thing that you keep collapsing as if you're about to die. I think you've done more than enough already to make yourself stronger."
Tory is the one to shrug her shoulders at that. "I think what you're saying is right," she says, "but at this rate nobody's ever going to hire her, right? She can't do anything at all."
My father shakes his head. "Not at all, she can work at the gate!"
"Huh? What can she do there?"

Tory and my mother both look at my father in bewilderment. Why they're bewildered, I

have no idea.

Have they just been not paying any attention at all when I've been telling them what I do all day at the gate? Or did they just not believe me at all?

"What can she do? Paperwork, of course! Even now, when she goes to the gate she does some work as Otto's little assistant. …More than half the time, he's teaching her how to write, though."
"*Really?!* I thought she was just going there to take breaks!"
"I thought she had to have been making up all of those ridiculous stories!"

Tory, why are you acting so surprise? Also, mother, that's *mean*! Their excessively honest reactions feel like a stab in the gut.

"She's especially suited for work that involves a lot of calculations. If she wanted, after her baptism she could work at the gates officially. How about it, Maine? Want to come work with your daddy?"
"Huh? Nuh-uh. I'm going to run a *'bookstore'* or be a *'librarian'*."

Unfortunately, I have zero ambition to follow my father to work every day in order to do the gatekeepers' paperwork. However, this is a world that hasn't yet seen bookstores or libraries, so of course everyone looks at me doubtfully, not understanding what I said at all.

"…Aaahh, Maine. What are those?"
"Someone who sells books… so, a merchant, I guess? Hmmm, maybe being a merchant isn't quite right for me, but I'm going to do a job that involves a lot of books."
"Well, I don't really get what you're saying, but I think that it's great if you can do the things you want to do. For now, doing the things you can do is just fine. Half a year ago, you couldn't walk to the forest at all. You could barely even go outside! Now, you can go in and out of the house as much as you want on your own."
"…Yeah."

Today, I was told that I needed to go out and do my best to gather some firewood, so I strapped a wicker basket to my back and went with Tory off to the forest. It's true that I can indeed walk all the way to the forest, just like my family said, but by the time I get there, I need to take a long rest, and if I'm not very careful about how much I move around I might need to spend the entire next day in bed.

I *really* hate this feeble body.

When we got to the forest, I took a break to catch my breath, then I got up and started to help search for firewood. All I'm doing is looking around for branches that have fallen off already, but Tory actively searches for low-hanging branches, then hacks at them with a knife that's like a small machete. They break off with a creak and a snap!

"Wow, Tory really is amazing…" I say aloud, once again impressed by Tory's raw competency. "I've got to keep working hard too, doing whatever I can."

I redouble my efforts, working until I run out of breath. I sit down on a nearby rock to take a break. Without wasting any time, I pull out my knife, intending to start make *mokkan*.

"Whoa, this is really heavy," I sigh, feeling the weight of the dully gleaming blade in my hands. Knives aren't something that I have literally zero familiarity with. In Japan, I used kitchen knives and box cutters in my day-to-day life.

However, I have basically no experience with whittling. What little I do have comes from elementary school, where we had a lesson on sharpening our pencils with little blades. At the time, however, I decided that using a pencil sharpener was good enough for me and barely paid any attention. Now, I'm regretting that decision.

Even if I decide to brave the dangers and try making *mokkan* anyway, I still don't know how to use a knife, though!

When I can't do more than timidly scrape wood off a pencil, there's no way I'd be able to wield a knife like this with any amount of skill. Will I really be able to make *mokkan*?

As an experiment, I dig through my pile of gathered branches until I find a thin branch, then I try to shave a layer off of it. It's difficult to manage with my tiny, weak hands, but I peel off a sizable strip of bark, revealing the color of the wood inside.

Ah! This might be a little bit on the difficult side, but I think I can do it!

I can simultaneously practice using my knife and make *mokkan* as well, killing two birds with one stone. With glee, I start pulling out the pieces of wood that I had gathered, whittling them until they're long, narrow, straight, and flat, then cut them to the same length and lay them out next to each other. Once I tie these together with a thin cord, I'll be able to roll them up like a scroll, and they'll really be *mokkan*. I think I can turn these into something about the size of a page from a memo pad.

Ancient civilizations, ancestors, thank you for your magnificent wisdom. Mother, father, thank you for this magnificent knife. It is thanks to you that I can make these *mokkan*.

Since the raw materials for these are just pieces of wood that I can pick up from the ground, this involves far less labor than carefully extracting grass fibers to make papyrus or doing the back-breaking excavation work needed to get the clay to make tablets.

Excellent.

At my level of skill, I need to whittle away bit by bit to get each stick planed flat enough that I can write on it. It would be amazing if I could slice it all off in a single, powerful stroke, but there's really no point in wishing for the moon. I steadily whittle away at each stick, piling more and more finished *mokkan* next to me. With my hands as they are now, all I can whittle are fine, slender sticks. If I want to be able to actually write a book, the number of these things I'll need is not trivial at all.

"Maine, what are you making to replace your clay tablets?"[1] says Lutz as he walks over,

seemingly done with gathering firewood for the day, and leans in to inspect my handiwork.

That was not the question I expected him to ask at all. I look at him quizzically.

"…Huh? Why do you think I'm making these to replace my tablets?"
"Because you looked like you were having so much fun, right?"
"Huh? I looked like I was having fun?"
"Yeah, you looked like you wanted to rub your face all over those sticks. It was the same kind of expression you had when you saw all the clay for the first time, you know?"

Huh? I was sitting alone, whittling, with an expression that looked like I wanted to bury my face in a pile of wood? …Wouldn't that make me look really strange?

…Yiiikes! I didn't realize that at all! That's extremely embarrassing!

The embarrassment of having that so unexpectedly pointed out to me makes my insides squirm, but Lutz is very focused on examining my handiwork.

"So, what are you making?"
"…I'm making *'mokkan'*."
"'Moe-kahn'? Are you going to be writing on these too?"
"Yeah, which is why I need a lot of them. I'm not very strong, so I can't make them any bigger than this."

I pick up my knife again and start whittling away. Lutz sits down next to me and grabs a somewhat larger stick of his own.

"I'll help you out! Do me a favor in return though: the next time you see that Otto guy you were talking about, could you ask him something for me?"
"What do you want to know?"
He glances around the forest clearing nervously, then leans in close to whisper in to me quietly. "I want to hear what it's like to be a trader…"

A while ago, he shared with me his dreams of becoming a trader or a minstrel, traveling from town to town and seeing the world.

Based on the fact that he was so cautious about checking to see if anyone was around and the fact that he kept his voice so low, I wonder if this world looks down on traders and minstrels? I don't really know. My personal opinion, lacking any grounding in this world's common sense, is definitely not worth as much to Lutz as what I could get from Otto if I asked him about it.

"He's a very busy man, but I'll try asking him. He might refuse, though, sorry."
"That's okay," he replies.

He breathes a sudden sigh of relief, looking like someone who has just set down a very heavy burden. He's finally found someone to talk to about something that he couldn't share with anyone.

We don't talk very much after that, and just quietly sit making *mokkan*. It looks like Lutz carries a large, wide-bladed knife like Tory's, so he's able to easily turn relatively thick branches into several wide boards each. I take those and use my own knife to clean up the writing surfaces until both sides are flawless.

I wonder if I'll be able to get someone to give me some of the ink that we use at the gate?

Fundamentally, ink is something that is used with paper, so it's not the kind of thing that you can ordinarily find in stores around here. Now that I think about it, the ink at the gate is locked up as carefully as the parchment is. It might not just be paper that's expensive, but ink as well.

Hopefully, I'll be able to convince Otto to stop paying my salary in slate pencils and to switch over to paying me ink. And, while I'm at it, I'll be able to convey Lutz's request.

The next day, I go to the gates.

It's a day where Tory has work and is thus not available to supervise me, so I head to the gates to study. Lately, the number of words I've been learning that are actually usable day-to-day has been increasing, which makes me very happy.

Starting today, we have three new apprentice soldiers; Tory's contemporaries. Otto has to teach them how to read, write, and do math, so he's suddenly very busy. After he finishes with training the new recruits, he immediately returns to the duty room and does all of the normal day-to-day work he has to do.

I myself am very busy, between learning new vocabulary and helping with computation, so I don't have very many opportunities to talk. When I notice Otto finish up one set of paperwork and start working to clean up the ink bottle, I seize my chance.

"Mister Otto, I've got a question I want to ask, is now okay?"
"Sure, what is it?"
"How do you become a trader?"
"*Huh?!* Maine, you want to become a *trader*?! Huh? Wait a minute! Is this my fault? Squad Leader's going to *murder* me!"

With huge, panicked eyes, Otto hunches forward over the desk, muttering hysterically. I'm shocked by this sudden display, and quickly wave my hands to try to dispel his fears.

"No, no, it's not for me, it's for a friend."
"Ah! Well then, you should tell them that they shouldn't try."
"Oh, it really is like that?"

Based on his terse response, it would seem like peddling is indeed an objectionable profession.

"What do you mean by 'like that'?" he says, his eyes narrowing. I briefly contemplate how

to phrase things in an easy-to-convey manner, then open my mouth to speak.

"Ummm, when my friend asked me about it, he made sure that nobody was around, and he was whispering, so I thought that maybe people thought it wasn't a good job to do."
"Well, his parents would give him a good talking to, anyway."
"Also, traders are always traveling, right? They're always going here and there, thinking about what they need to buy in one place and what they need to sell in another, right? Settling down is a completely different lifestyle, where you can have familial bonds and even repeat customers, so it's not the kind of thing that you'd think a kid who lives in a town would suddenly think that they'd want to do…"

That kind of free-wandering nomadic lifestyle seems like the kind of thing that the children of farmers, who are expected to settle down, would be drawn to. Life is so fundamentally different here, to the point where my own common knowledge doesn't connect with it at all. Working seems to be far more strict of a thing than I was expecting.

Every day, I do things that completely backfire, and I often have no idea of why they could have possibly done so. You'd think that at some point the correct answer to be to do nothing, but even if I did nothing I'd still wind up being criticized. There's no manual for the mass of unwritten rules that govern daily life here. I, the woman who has no idea what the correct thing to do is in this unexpected alternate reality and just wants to shut herself inside forever, do truly understand the barriers of common sense.

Well, if I were to lock myself inside, I wouldn't have any books, so I wouldn't have anything to do, so I basically have to go outside anyway.

"…Well, if you know that much, why didn't you tell him?"
"Hmm, well, I think that it would be better if he heard it from you, Otto. I've been living in a town all my life, but you've got a lot of experience, so I think he'd listen to you. Also, my daddy said that you have some connections with the merchant guild, right? If my friend can't become a trader, then maybe he could do his apprenticeship under a merchant instead. I was thinking that maybe he could still leave the town from time to time to go buy things."

As far as Lutz's family goes, I think they'd be much more comfortable if his travels were to known parts of the world on official business, rather than aimlessly wandering through distant lands.

"Ahhh, I see what's happening here!" he says, the corners of his mouth quirking up in a sly grin. "Since you're making all this effort to be the middleman here, this kid must be your favorite, right?"

He seems to have caught a whiff of a secret love story. I shrug my shoulders.

"It's not that he's my favorite," I say off-handedly, "it's that he's always helping me out, so I feel like I should return the favor before the debts start stacking up too high."
"The kid who's helping you, is that the blond one?"

Otto must have seen us one on of the times that Lutz, serving as my pacemaker, came

through the gate, dragging my exhausted self back from the forest, stopping briefly to deliver a report to my father in exchange for a little bit of pocket money.

"That's right. I know that you're super busy with the newcomers, though, so if you can't do it…"
"This is actually the least-busy season in the entire year, so this is a great time. How about during the next holiday?"
"Thanks, Mister Otto!"

Although, if this is supposed to be the least busy season, how much work am I going to actually have when it's time for me to help out with the treasurer's report and the budget compilations? I've already agreed to help, though, so that's not something I want to thinking about.

"Ah! Mister Otto, I've got one more thing I want to ask: could I please have a little bit of this ink, if you can?"
"You mean this ink?" he says, frowning as he taps the closed lid of the inkwell with one finger. The black liquid within sloshes slightly.
I nod vigorously. "Could you maybe pay me in ink instead of slate pencils from now on?"
"That's three years' wages, and I'm not giving you an advance."
"What?!"

His instantaneous reply leaves me dumbfounded, my eyes wide with shock. I want to believe that I absolutely must have misheard him, but his expression is very serious as he starts to explain.

"After you move from assistant to apprentice, your wages are going to change, but right now, even including the bonus you'll get from helping with the budget, it'll take you three years, I think."
"*Three years?!* …That's expensive!"

My expression is one of utter shock. There's no way I could have possibly expected that it would be *that* expensive. Otto's wry smile says that he's going to have to start teaching me the names of the things on our budget.

"Even here, we only ever use it for the official paperwork that the nobility gives us, right? It's far too pricey of a thing for a child to play with."

In other words, this is absolutely not a thing that I will be able to purchase for myself. Understood.

…If that's the case, what should I use to write on my *mokkan*? Even if I have the boards, they're useless if I can't write on them, right?

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Lutz uses the actual word for "clay tablets" here, as opposed to a phonetic pronunciation.

This would indicate that either the Japanese word has entered his vocabulary as a loanword or they've found an equivalent term in their native tongue. (Or the author goofed.)

022Ink Making and Mokkan: The Conclusion

"Gaaah! I solved my paper problem, but now I have to get ink, too! Why meee!"

No store in this area sells anything like the ballpoint pens and mechanical pencils I'm used to. There are no regular pencils, no fountain pens, and, of course, there's neither liquid nor block ink. If ink were freely available, then I wouldn't need anything more than a sharp stick to write with, but ink is so expensive that I can't obtain it at all. I know how much the slate pencils I get paid in cost, but I don't know what my special wages will be during bonus season, so I can't use Otto's three-year estimate to calculate how much it actually costs.

It's *three years' worth of work*, you know?

My options here are: buy it, find it, be given it, steal it, and make it. Thinking about it, the only real option I have is to make it.

After all, there's no way I can actually steal any from the night duty room…

It seems like it's not just books that I have to hand-make, but ink as well. Even so, is making ink even something that I'm capable of doing? I know that it involves a pigment and a drying oil, but will I be able to acquire whatever pigments and oils exist in this world?

"Wouldn't it be great if I could just find an *'octopus'* or a *'squid'*? Where the heck is the ocean?!" I shout, tightly clutching the *mokkan* I've been carving. Lutz, sitting next to me, flinches. "What now?!" he says, turning to look at me.
"Lutz, can you think of anything here I can use as ink?! Or even a way I can make it?!"

Of course, going on a journey to the ocean and fishing up a octopi and squid is unrealistic. However, I can't think of a single thing amongst my possessions that I could use to make either a liquid or solid ink.

"What's 'ink'?"
"Ummm, it's a black liquid, that you use for writing on things like these boards…"

Explaining the concept of ink to someone who'd ordinarily never see anything like it is rather difficult. Lutz tilts his head in confusion as I try to lay it out for him.

"A black thing? If you don't mind unclean sorts of things, then do you think maybe ash or soot might work?"
"Yeah, that! I'll try that!"

If I'm going to use ash or soot, then that's something that my home always has around in the cinders of our fireplace. This is something that I can undoubtedly get *immediately*.

As soon as I return home, I immediately try asking my mother.

"Mommy, can I use some of this ash?"
"No, you can't," she replies immediately, rejecting me without any hesitation.

“Huh? Why not?”
“We use ash to make soap, melt snow, dye things, sell to farmers… it has a lot of uses, you know? Please don’t arbitrarily waste any of it.”

Come to think of it, when spring came around, I helped scatter ashes around for some incomprehensible reason, like I was in *Hanasaka Jiisan*.[1] I guess that was for melting snow, huh? I only just figured that out now. If we need to use a lot of it for making soap, then I guess it really is an important material.

Since we can sell whatever’s left over, it seems like it would be difficult for me to acquire any ash, but I wonder if my other option, using soot, would be feasible?

“Then, Mommy, could I use the soot?”

My mother scowls a little bit after I asked for another thing, but after a moment she suddenly breaks out into a smile.

“Well, I don’t know what you want to use it for, but, sure, you can have some soot.”
“Oh, yay!”
“You can have whatever you can sweep out of the stove. You can get even more if you clean out the chimney too, you know!”
“Wha?! …Ah… right. …I guess, you’re right.”

My grinning mother has taken advantage of my plight, and now I get to sweep out the chimney. This wasn’t what I’d expected to have to do, but if it’s for the sake of gathering soot, then I’ve got no choice. With fire in my eyes, I grab the narrow broom we use for sweeping the chimney, only to be stopped by my mother, her grin slipping from her face.

“Wait just one second, Maine! Are you planning on doing that in those clothes?!”
“…Huh? I shouldn’t?”

These clothes are already kind of dirty and worn-out, so I have no idea how it could possibly be a problem for me to sweep out the stove in clothes like this. I look skeptically at my mother as she goes to get her sewing kit and the box of old cleaning rags.

“I’ll make you something better, wait for a moment.”

With high spirits, my mother stitches together some clothing made out of cleaning rags with lightning speed. I change into my new cleaning-rag clothes, then decide that it wouldn’t do at all for my hair to get stained with soot, so I pin it up and use another rag as a bandana to cover my head.

Wow, I never thought I’d be doing Cinderella cosplay, but here I am.

First of all, I scrape the ashes out of the bottom of the fireplace and set them aside. After that, I stick my head in the oven and start knocking down and collecting all of the soot that I can. This is probably the first time I’ve actually been glad to have such a small body. I can’t deny my mother’s smile, so while I was at it I started sweeping out the chimney to collect

the soot from there as well. As black particles crumble from the walls, the chimney starts looking cleaner and cleaner, and the pile of my much sought-after soot grows taller and taller.

This is way more fun than I thought it was going to be when I started out, and I got so engrossed in it that I wound up pushing myself too hard. The next day, my fever came back and I was laid out all day.

I may be covered in soot, I may have collapsed, but I somehow managed to collect my pile of soot. Now I need to get my health back as well… I really want to get better enough today to start working on writing with this soot.

"Maine," asks Lutz, "what do we do with this?"
"I think we try water first?"

The first step that I came up with is dissolving the soot in water. I feel like it might turn into something ink-like. Somehow. I scoop a little bit of water from the river into a wooden bowl add some soot, and then stir it round and round with a piece of wood. The soot doesn't seem to dissolve very well, and most of it just floats on top of the water.

"It turned out like this, huh…" I mumble.
"Well, I wonder how well you can write with it?"

I nod at him, then dip the sharpened stick we're using in place of a pen into the bowl. Tentatively, I try marking the top of one of my *mokkan* with its page number, "1". However, way more of the soot stuck to my stick than to the wood of the board, and the number that I wrote is so faint as to be illegible.

"Ah, man… That's a failure."
"What's next?"
"Hmmm, well, my original theory was that I should try mixing the soot with oil, but…"

Oil is one thing I can't request from my mother. Vegetable oil is used not only in a lot of our cooking, but I also use a lot of it to make my simple shampoo, so we never have enough of it. Also, animal-based oils are used for making candles and soaps, so I think that's not something I can easily get either. Probably, my mother would shoot down my request as quickly as she did when I asked about the ashes.

"Using oil, huh. I guess you couldn't get any?"
"Yeah, it's impossible. Is there nothing else we could try…?"

Searching for hints, I flip through in my mind all of the Japanese writing implements I can think of.

"Ah, the *'paints'* that were used in *'Japanese painting'* used *'gelatin glue'*… but, I'm not allowed to use any fire, so that's not going to work."

In the future, I might be able to try making a gelatin-based ink, but right now I don't have that kind of setup. If I were to be able to use gelatin, then I could make paints out of natural materials, so my options would dramatically increase. However, I can't actually wait until I grow up.

"Heeey, Maine, you still with me?" says Lutz, waving his hand back and forth in front of my face to bring my thoughts back down to earth. "Snap out of it."

"Hmmm, well, it's probably okay if it's not a liquid. We could make something like *'crayons'* or *'chalk'* or… *'pencils'*… Ah, right! We can use clay! Let's mix it with clay!"
"Huhh?" he says, an extremely skeptical look on this face.
"If I'm not mistaken, mixing *'graphite'* with clay will give me something like *'pencil lead'*. Like, um… *'conté'*, maybe…?[2] Well, whatever. We're using soot, not *'graphite'*, but I think it'll work out!"

Mix soot and clay, make it into round, slender sticks, then let them dry out. Once they harden up, I may actually be able to write with them.

"Lutz, back when we were making *'clay tablets'*, we dug up the clay somewhere around here, right?"
"We don't have to dig any up, actually. Last time, we dug up more than we used, and I think we put the leftovers somewhere around that rock."

Just like he says, there's a small pile of clay over there. I take a bit of it, then knead soot into it until it's thoroughly mixed. My mental image here is something like a Coupy Pencil[3] or the core of a pencil. If touching it doesn't blacken your fingertips, it won't produce a usable color.

Both my hands and the rock that I'm using as a work surface get stained pitch black as I work. I roll my soot pencils into long, slender tubes, then cut them down to about the length of a pencil. If these harden up when they dry, then this will be a great success.

I try to wash my hands off in the river, but they don't get much cleaner. I'm going to have to scrub down with soap when I get home. These persistent stains, however, make me feel like I'll definitely be able to write with these.

"How long should we let these dry for, I wonder?" I say.
"Who knows?"
"Should we maybe try baking them?"
"Let's not do anything unnecessary. They might explode again."
"Urgh…"

Over the next few days, my soot pencils gradually start to dry out and solidify. I wrap one in an old dust rag so that I'll be able to use it without staining my hands. After that, I use my knife to sharpen the tip, then try writing a letter.

It writes! It may crumble very easily in my grip, but for now, I can write with these. These will be less like books and more like antique media, but this *works*.

"We did it! Lutz, it writes!"
"Oh! Good job."

I, having made my own writing implements from scratch, cheerfully work on making more *mokkan*. Since I have a guaranteed source of materials as long as I go out to gather firewood, I can accumulate these things very cheaply. The best part about this is that I'm able to do everything, from start to finish, with my own power. The only major problem with these is that they'll be very bulky when they start to pile up, but that was going to be a problem with clay tablets, anyway. I'll just have to deal with it until I'm an independent adult.

My pile of completed *mokkan* grows to satisfaction, but one day I return from the forest to unexpectedly find that they've disappeared. The place I've been stockpiling them is suddenly empty.

"G… gone?! They're gone? What?!"
"What's wrong, Maine?"

As I frantically search through the storeroom for my missing *mokkan*, my mother pokes her head in to see what's the matter.

"Mommy, do you know what happened to the *'mokkan'* I left here?"
"'Moe-kahn'? Well, what are those?"

"Ummm, they're pieces of wood, and they're a bunch of different sizes, but they've all been flattened on both sides so that I can write on them…"
"Ah, the firewood you brought back? I used it, you know?"
"Uh? Huh? You used it? Why?"

My head suddenly goes completely blank.

"It was the firewood that you worked so diligently to bring back after you worked so hard to get strong enough to help out, you know? It wouldn't be nice for me to not use it."
"But, the pile of firewood is over there, right? Why did you use the pile that I specifically kept separated from that? Those were a compilation of the fairy tales you told me to get me to sleep at night!"
"Aw," she says, stroking my head, "if you want me to tell you stories, all you need to do is ask." She smiles, thinking that her daughter will still be spoiled rotten no matter how much time may pass.
"That's not what I meant…"

Not a single one is left. I stare blankly at the spot where my *mokkan* used to be, and all of the strength leaves my body. All of the effort I put into them, all of the *struggle*, was for naught. They're cinders. When I think about that, I don't think I can get motivated for anything again.

The moment my strength fails me, a heat that was buried deep inside my body explodes out. A fever, stronger than the ones I get after getting too excited or working too hard, blasts through me in an instant. In its grip, my limbs go numb and I lose all ability to move.

"What's…"

Without any understanding of what could possibly be happening within my body, I suddenly collapse, whimpering like I was trapped in a nightmare.

My consciousness trembles as I slowly sink deeper into the churning, swirling fever. I feel like I'm slowly dying, bit by bit, under the fever's relentless assault. It's only now that I'm experiencing it firsthand that I can clearly comprehend how the real Maine could have been swallowed whole by a fever like this.

As I slip further and further away, without even the willpower to struggle against it, flashes of worried faces pass through my consciousness, my family members looking in, concerned, to check on me. Lutz's face is among them.

…Why… is Lutz…?

I push my way up towards him, and my submerged consciousness starts to float back to the surface. I strain my temples, pushing even harder, and everything comes into focus. This isn't just an image that floated itself across my mind. I've consciously managed to get Lutz focused in my field of view.

"Maine?" he says, his eyes wide.
"…Lutz?"
"Mrs. Eva!" he yells, turning towards the kitchen. "Maine w…woke up!"

My mother rushes into the room.

"Maine. You collapsed so suddenly, and I thought you'd never wake up again!"
"Yeah… sometimes, I saw your face. I'm sorry to make you worry. …Mommy, my throat is really scratchy. I feel really sticky too, so I want to wash myself off. Could you bring me some water?"
"Alright, I'll be right back," she says, turning to leave.

As soon as I see her step out, I grab Lutz's hand tightly. I still can't even raise my head, lying down like this.

"…Lutz," I whisper, "I failed again. My mother burned all of my *'mokkan'*."
"Oh maaan… Well, they do really just look like weirdly-shaped cuts of wood."
"But I put so much effort into them, and I put them aside on purpose…"

I can't take anymore. Fate itself has decreed that I'm never going to finish my book.

I sigh in defeat, and I can feel the fever start to come back to life. I shake my head to clear it before I'm pulled under again.

“Don’t get so down,” says Lutz. “Doesn’t that just mean that we should try something that doesn’t burn well?”

My *mokkan* were made out of wood, so they were used for firewood. If that’s the case, then we should make them out of something that won’t get burned. Lutz’s suggestion is like a spark of light in the darkness.

Now is not the time to be drowning in fever. I need to think of a good replacement material. I focus all of my willpower inward, feeling like I’m grabbing hold of the fever and squeezing it down into the tiniest ball I can.

“…What do you think we could use that wouldn’t burn?” I say, after a long pause. I’ve put some thought into it, but I really can’t come up with anything, either because my mind is still hazy from the fever or because I just don’t know what I could find around here that would work.
“Ummm, maybe, bamboo, or something like that?”
“Ah!! …Lutz, you’re a genius!”

Bamboo pops when it burns, so it’s probably not the kind of thing that you’d simply burn. Hope floods through me once more. When that happens, for some reason my fever starts going down as well, and I can breathe a little more comfortably.

“Oh, what are you talking about?” asks my mother, entering the room carrying a bucket of water. Lutz and I glance at each other.
“It’s a secret,” I say, with a little grin.
“Maine,” says Lutz, “I’ll go out and get that, so you absolutely need to make sure you get better, okay?”
“Thanks, Lutz! You’re so sweet.”
His eyes go wide. “Th-this is just so you’ll introduce me to Otto!” he yells, fleeing from the room. “I’m paying you in advance, so you’d better get healthy! Got it?!”

As his footsteps fade away, I start to scrub myself down with the water that my mother brought in for me.

This fever was *strange*. I can’t think of a single disease that would cause a fever to suddenly explode out like that, especially not one that would slowly devour at my consciousness. Plus, I’ve definitely never heard of any sort of fever that could be forced aside through sheer willpower alone. What the heck kind of sickness is this, wriggling around in my body?

When I first came here, I was getting feverish fairly regularly, but I didn’t think that was particularly strange. However, once I managed to train my body into being a little bit more robust, then the strangeness of my fevers became much more apparent. What the heck could be wrong with this body? My family, however, is not at all affluent enough to afford a doctor in this world, and there’s no encyclopedia of common diseases around, so this isn’t something that I can immediately research.

…Well, if I concentrate on bringing down my fever, it seems to go down slowly, so maybe

we'll just wait and see?

After two more days of thinking about dealing with my fever, Lutz comes to my home in the evening, with a bundle of bamboo that he cut down to the perfect size for use as bamboo slips.[4] He even shaved off all of the skin, so I can start writing on them right away.

"Don't even think about touching these until you're healthy again," he says, sternly. "Got it? If you break this promise, I'll never help you again."
"Okay. Thanks, Lutz."

I hold on to just one slip, and ask my mother to put the rest of them in the storage room. I'm still too sick to get out of bed, but as soon as my fever's gone down all the way, I'll be able to write on these and then *finally* finish my work. My first priority, then, is to get better.

Holding tightly to the bamboo slip that Lutz brought me in one hand, I gradually drift off to sleep. Just when I was almost completely out, though, loud cracks start piercing through the air.

"Gyaah?!" screams my mother from the kitchen.
"W… what?! What happened?"

Crack after crack rings out from within the oven, like there's something inside that's bursting open. My mother storms into the room, livid.

"Maine! What did Lutz bring into this house?!"
"…Bamboo?"
"Ugh! That was misleading! I thought he was bringing us firewood, since you can't go and get any!"

I suddenly realize the source of those cracking sounds. She burnt the bamboo, thinking that it was firewood. It sounds like it's exploding with far more force than the bamboo that I'm used to; is bamboo different in this world?

"Oh, did you mistake it for firewood, since the skin was already shaved off? …Wait, don't bamboo and wood look different, though?"
"Bamboo and vanihitz wood look very similar, you know?"
"I've never seen that kind of tree before, so I guess I didn't know…"

I don't recognize the name of that tree. At least, when I was at the forest, I didn't see any sort of tree that resembled bamboo.

"What are you talking about? That's the wood you were using to weave baskets with Tory during the winter. It's what your own basket's made out of!"
"Oh, I remember now. I guess they really do look similar once you peel off the bark."

I remember, now that I think back to the preparations that Tory had been doing for her basket-weaving winter work. Vanihitz wood looks like any other wood while the bark is on,

but it looks very much like bamboo once it's peeled off.

"Anyway, don't bring any more bamboo into the house. It's dangerous! Are we clear?"
"…Yes…"

Bamboo is forbidden as well. Yeah, I was afraid of this, ever since I heard those first pops. I'm sorry, Lutz, since you tried so hard…

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Hanasaka Jiisan is a Japanese folktale.
2. Conté are a kind of crayon, which are made of compressed graphite or charcoal and use either clay or wax as a base.
3. Coupy Pencils are a brand of plastic pencil.
4. Bamboo Slips were one of the main recording media of early China.

I usually don't translate the author's notes, but this one's fairly important information:

"The next chapter will be a little bit of a breather. It'll be a chapter about cooking, not really related to the main thread of the plot."

023Cooking Tribulations

Here are some things that happened while I was still waiting for my soot pencils to dry out.

Now that Tory's started going to work, cooking has been added to my list of duties. However, I can't hold a kitchen knife very well and I don't really know how to make or properly use fire, so right now there's very little that I can do from start to finish entirely on my own. Right now, I work with my mother, helping out as much as I possibly can.

I've been struggling with this for a while, but I really want to do a few experiments to see if I can finally start eating Japanese food again. Originally, I was ready to blast this kitchen apart with all my modern knowledge, but when I let it loose, the result was less of a blast and more of a fizzle.

After all, it's fundamentally hopeless, right from the beginning. I really crave Japanese food, but there's no rice. No miso. No soy sauce. You can't buy mirin or other kinds of sake anywhere, of course. If I don't have the right seasonings, I don't think I've got any options. I can't think of anything I can actually make.

Well, you know, I actually do know how to make miso and soy sauce, right? If I've got the ingredients, I've got the knowhow. It's just soybeans and koji[1]. I learned it in elementary school! We went on a field trip to a miso factory, and I actually paid a lot of attention to how they made it in the olden days.

But, where do I find soybeans or koji in this world? It's possible that I could substitute some other kind of bean for soybeans, but where can I actually buy koji? Of course, you can make koji from things that you can find in nature, but that's a really scary proposition. After all, koji is *mold*, right? If I mess up even a little bit, I'm going to drag every single member of my family into a nightmare of food poisoning. Even if I were to just happen across koji, then there's still the terrifying thought of trying to ferment something in this bacteria-infested place, *plus* it will put off enough of a stench that it'll get thrown out long before it's complete.

So, I gave up on making my own seasonings and started thinking long and hard about what kinds of Japanese food I could possibly make without any Japanese seasonings at all.

How about sashimi? We don't have any soy sauce, but if you eat it with citrus fruit juice mixed with salt, that would still be tasty, right?

Although, this place doesn't seem to be close to the ocean. Even when I search through the town market, I can't find anyone selling fresh saltwater fish. There's no wakame or other kinds of seaweed for sale, either. Forget sashimi, I can't even make a seaweed salad.

So, if there's no seafood, there's obviously no kombu. No bonito flakes, either. I want to make Japanese food, but I can't even make dashi[2]. This is a fatal blow.

Man, I'm not even going to ask for instant dashi… just, give me some kombu and bonito

flakes, please?

There's these cucumber-like things that could be pickled, but I don't have soy sauce, my mother won't let me use any sugar, and I don't have any kind of vinegar to use except wine vinegar, so the taste is so wildly different that I can't be satisfied with it at all. I tried making it once, but it was so harshly sour that it was nothing at all like the pickles I was thinking of.

Vexed over my inability to do anything at all, I tried something very simple that even a child like me could do: I rubbed salt into slices of a pseudo-cucumber and ate it. The salt drew out a little bit of the moisture and made it just a little bit more tender, and it had the perfect amount of saltiness to remind me just a little of tsukemono[3]. I thought that I'd finally be satisfied once I'd tasted something remotely Japanese-y, but, on the contrary, it only made me cry for the white rice I so dearly miss. Incidentally, I tried putting the salted cucumber on the multi-grain bread we have in the house, but that didn't work at all; they don't have particularly good affinity.

Rice! Rice! Japanese food! Someone, please! Give me some Japanese food!!

Thanks to those cucumbers, my cravings for Japanese food became so great that I thought I might try going to the river, catching some fish, and making something even vaguely Japanese. I can't use fire, so I don't have any alternatives but drying, so I decided to try drying out whatever fish I could catch. If I brought along some salt, then I could salt the fish and let it dry, and that might even work. …I really hoped it would work.

"Hey, Lutz," I said. "I want to catch some fish. Can I do that in this river?"
"I don't think you'd be able to."

Just like he said, I was completely defeated. Fishing is, by itself, its own challenge.

As I sat there, dejected, Lutz caught some fish and brought them over to me.

"Look, I caught some, but what are you thinking of doing?"
"Can I have these?"
"Yeah, sure, I don't really need them."
"Lutz… are you able to make a fire? I want to try making *'shioyaki'*."[4]

I can't wait at all, so I try cooking the fish he brought me shioyaki-style, like I would sweetfish. Then, I took a bite.

…Foul!
Bitter!
Awful!

My face immediately scrunched up after just one bite. Strange, it was far less refined of a taste than I was expecting. What on earth could make it smell so awful? I didn't think my grilling methods were wrong, so I tilted my head to the side, searching my memories to figure out what could have possibly happened. Lutz looked on with a frown.

“If you don’t cook it right,” he says, “it must really stink when you eat it like that, right?”
“……Yeah, it stinks.”

This is a stinky fish. It would have been great if he told me that earlier.

Next, I pulled out my knife. It’s different both in form and function than a modern kitchen knife, and it’s a little bit worn, but that’s not going to have any effect on the flavor. I sharpened a stick and then speared the fish through, thinking I could actually make dried food like this. I left it alone for a while as I gathered firewood so the sun could dry it out. While I wasn’t paying attention, though, it suddenly became rock-hard and inedible. It seems like, somehow, too much moisture evaporated.

“Maine… what *is* this?”
“…Fish that dried too much. Dried fish is supposed to be food, but you can’t eat this at all.”
“Yeah, I’ll say. No matter how I look at it, that doesn’t look like food at all.”
“I might be able to make *'dashi’* with this, though. I’m going to bring these home and try that out.”

This might have been inedible as dried food, but there was a chance I might be able to use it as a base for dashi. When I got home, carrying the withered husks of the fish, I tried my hand at making dashi.

“Maine, what are you doing?!” yelled my mother as soon as she saw what I was doing.
“That’s disgusting! Don’t you dare put that thing in my pot!”
“Umm, Mommy, I want to try making *'dashi’*, though…”
“Absolutely not! The only thing that goes in that pot is food.”

…It probably would have *become* food, though.

Thanks to the fact that my mother finds dried fish disgusting, my plans to make dashi have been strongly prohibited. Maybe it’s because of the fact that she doesn’t often see fish in her daily life that she seems to think that dried-out fish are disgusting. Even though she *did* look at a pig whose skull was split half open and say that it looked delicious…

I’m sorry, Mister Fish.

In conclusion: making Japanese food is impossible, at least for me. Without dashi and without seasonings, there isn’t a single thing left for me to try. Once I give up on finding miso, soy sauce, or sake, there’s basically no Japanese-style cooking left for me to try. I’m keenly aware of how fundamentally important these seasonings are.

For now, at least, I need to be thinking about what kind of foods I can make that, even if they’re only tangentially Japanese, still have the kinds of flavors that you might find in Japan. Even that would be worthwhile. Yeah.

Then, somehow, a bird was delivered to my house. It seems like one of our neighbors managed to bring down five birds while in the forest. In this season, it would be almost impossible for them to eat all of that before it spoiled, so they gave it to my father, repaying

him for when he did that same for them a while ago.

The one to handle preparing this bird, whose name I don't even know, was my mother. The knife used to prepare the meat is very large, so not only I but even Tory can't handle it.

"Maine. Come here and pluck the feathers for me," she says.
"O, okay…"

I grabbed hold of the bird as it lay limply on the table, then started pulling out its feathers. The disturbing sensation of the feathers pulling free sent shivers through me, giving me goosebumps. I told myself that I had no choice, and it's all for the sake of eating it, so I plucked the feathers, struggling not to cry. It looks like it'll be a long while before doing this sort of work becomes simple for me. However, when it came time to clean out the internal organs, I'm proud to say that I didn't faint, didn't run away, and was able to stay standing. I think I've grown a little, if I may say so myself.

"Now, Maine, we're ready to start cooking."
"Got it!"

After a lot of thought, I realized that I might be able to make a stock out of the leftover chicken carcass. If I have chicken carcass soup as a base, the number of things I can cook dramatically increases. I have neither kombu nor bonito flakes, but I wondered if I could make a usable stock if I substituted some other dried mushrooms for shiitake.

However, just making the soup was difficult. My mother had no idea what I wanted to do, and didn't help at all. It seemed she wanted to eat it grilled. I firmly insisted that it was my day to be the cook, however, and got her to give me the carcass and a few other large cuts of meat. After that, I was left to do everything myself.

I filled our biggest pot with water, then added the carcass, some breast meat, and some herbs one-by-one. Next, I started going through our vegetables, looking for things that have the right taste, smell, and texture even if they didn't have the right taste. I found that smelled like an onion, something that tasted a little like ginger, something that smelled a bit like garlic, and some leaves that were kind of like bay leaves, and so on. In order to get rid of any foul smells the bird might give off, I started adding these things to the pot one by one.

"Maine, wait!!" cries my mother, suddenly.
I freeze, knife in hand, holding the garlic-smelling plant on the cutting board by the leaves.
"Huh?"
"That's too much for you to handle. It's brutal!"

I stared blankly down at the vegetable, which looked like an ordinary radish, but white. She rushed over to confiscate both the knife and the radish. Grasping it tightly by the leaves, she holds it firmly down on the cutting board, giving it a look like she's daring it to run away. With a scowl, she chopped straight down, slicing the top cleanly off. At the same instant, I heard a sharp scream. From the radish.

"Uh? What?"

I blinked disbelievingly, convinced that I had to have misheard. My mother let go of the leaves, flipped the knife sideways, and smashed down on the radish with a loud bang, just like how you crush garlic. Crushing it like that took way less time than the fine-grained chopping I was planning on doing, so I thought she had saved me a lot of effort. When she lifted the knife, though, the white flesh of the radish had somehow turned red, almost like blood had spread over its surface. Scary.

"All set," she says. "You can use this once you make sure to wash it properly."
"…Okay."

My mother's expression seemed far more brutal than the radish was. I was just seeing things, right? Yeah. just seeing things. A trick of the eyes.

In this world, I occasionally see vegetables that resemble ones that I know from Earth, but there are lots of incomprehensibly strange foods here too. Whenever I run across a weird ingredient like this one, it only just reawakens the feelings that I'm no longer in the world I know.

Despite that little incident, I carefully skimmed the denatured fats off the top of the broth, taking with it the leaves that I used to soak up the bad flavors. I remember hearing that you're supposed to bring everything to a boil, drain off all the water, and then re-fill the pot clean water, but I've never had a soup that tasted bad because I didn't do that. I ignored that particularly bothersome step and just let it simmer over a low heat.

After I let it simmer for a while, I pulled out just the breast meat from the stock. I quickly quenched it in water, then pulled the tender meat apart into shreds. This will be delicious as a garnish on top of a salad.

As the soup simmered atop the stove, I worked on preparing the rest of the meat. I took the heart, the gizzard, and the other parts that go bad super easily and chopped them into chunks small enough to easily eat, then sprinkled salt and liquor on them. It's a simple way of baking these so you can more easily eat them. This is probably the kind of cooking that my family will be most easily able to understand. For an instant, the words "charcoal grill" flashed across my mind, but I had other ways to cook it so I gave up on the idea.

Our dinner was going to be organs and thigh meat. My mother slaved away over the thighs, cooking them like roast chicken, and prohibited me from interfering with that at all. I sprinkled salt and liquor on the breast meat, then put it aside in the winter preparation room so that I could use it in the next day's cooking. If I had a refrigerator or airtight plastic bags, I could make chicken ham, but, alas, I don't.

"…That smells pretty good!" says my mother.
"The taste isn't quite there yet."

My mother had been avoiding the stock pot as if it she thought it contained something unpleasant, but the scent of soup that started wafting through the air made her come a little closer to investigate. There was nothing left to do on the soup but let it simmer and carefully

skim off the fat, so I started finely chopping some of the vegetables. Thanks to this body, everything I want to do takes a tremendous amount of time, so it's best if I start on my next steps early.

My first experiment in my plan to eat Japanese-y food was nabe.[5] After all, I thought, if you have dashi, you can make nabe, right? I don't have access the dashi that I'm familiar with, but I had chicken soup. I have neither ponzu[6] nor sesame sauce, so I decided to cook pomay (the fruit that looks like a yellow pepper but tastes like a tomato) and some herbs into the broth make it into something like a tomato nabe.

I took the wingtips, which my mother says are hard to actually use because they're so bony, and added them to the pot. While they cooked, I chopped up some various seasonable vegetables, none of which I know the name for, into the right size for serving. When these are all cooked together in the broth, they'll be quite delicious. That's nabe's true charm, I think.

"Ah," I said, "That looks about ready." I set a strainer on top of our second-biggest pot. "Mommy, could you help me, please?"
"What do you need me to do?"
"I want to pour all of the soup in here to strain it, so that I can get out the parts I don't want in it."
"...Right," she said, looking a little bit relieved, "there's no way we were going to eat that, after all."

She poured out the chicken carcass soup into the strainer. I washed out the first pot, then had her pour the filtered soup back in there. Our second-biggest pot is the most-used pot in the house, so using that to keep soup stock would be a huge hindrance. Even my next few steps in making pomay nabe needed that pot.

I added some chopped, dried mushrooms to the finished soup stock, then got to work on making the pomay nabe. I carefully pulled the edible meat off of the boiled carcass and wingtips that we strained out of the soup, taking care to avoid stabbing myself on all of the tiny bones in the meat.

Based on the delicious scent of my mother's roast chicken that drifted through the room, and the amount of time I think it's been since we started, I thought it was just about time for me to put the finishing touches on the nabe.

"Maine! What are you doing?!"
"Putting... the vegetables in?"
"You have to boil those first!"

Generally speaking, when my mother cooks vegetables she boils them until they're limp to make them less bitter, then drains the water and uses just the boiled vegetables in the dish. This, however, gets rid of half the flavor and quite a bit of the nutritional value. I can't really complain about my mother's cooking, but when it comes to my own recipes, being forced to do things my mother's way would be a problem.

“For this kind of cooking it’s okay,” I explain.
“Aren’t you going to ruin that tasty-looking soup that you’ve worked so hard to make?”
“It’ll be fine!”

I boiled everything together while skimming off the fat, until finally the pomay nabe was complete. I gave it a little taste, and it was great. Even without boiling the vegetables first, everything turned out fine. Yep!

“I’m home!” said Tory as she walked through the door. “A~ah! It was coming from here!”
“Hi, Tory! What was coming from where?”
“I could smell this amazing smell from all the way down the main street! I got really hungry just smelling it as I walked. All the people I was passing were trying to find where it was coming from. I didn’t think it was coming from here!”

Is it like how you suddenly get hungry when you pass by a Chinese restaurant or a ramen shop? This chicken carcass soup has a really powerful aroma.

“I’m home,” said my father, returning home from the day shift. “Oh! That was my house I was smelling!”

It seemed like the scent of my chicken soup reached far and wide. My family gathered at the table, faces gleaming with anticipation. They all came together just in time for their dinner.

“This is made from a bird that Al dropped by to give us earlier today,” explains my mother. “He’s returning the favor from when you shared some of your hunting earlier. Maine and I cooked it up.”
“So, this unusual recipe is Maine’s, then?”
“That’s right.”

In the center of the table, my mother placed her roast chicken legs. Next to that is a salad, garnished with pulled chicken breast meat. Near my father, I put the salted, baked organ meats out as snacks, and I lined up bowls of pomay nabe for everyone. When it’s all split out like this, though, it’s not really nabe. It’s more like an ordinary pomay soup.

“What’s this?” asks Tory. “It smells really good. Can I eat it?”
“It’s pomay soup,” I reply. “I did my best making soup from the bird, so I think it’s going to be delicious. Try it!”

As I talked, Tory brought her face really close to her bowl of soup, eyes glittering, then grabbed her spoon and had a taste.

“Whoa, delicious! How?! This is really delicious.”
My mother tried a mouthful. “Oh my, it is!” she said, sincerely. “I’m really surprised. You were stewing bird bones and you didn’t cook the vegetables first, but it still turned out this well.”

It looked like she’d had a knot of anxiety within her about whether it was going to be

delicious, since she knew what went into making it.

"Amazing, Maine!" said my father, attacking his food with zeal. "You've got a real talent for cooking."

I tried a spoonful myself. The chicken stock had a very good flavor, splendidly bringing out the umami of the vegetables. Delicious.

Delicious, but not Japanese food.

The next day, I finished gathering firewood in the forest quickly and headed home. The younger kids have to come and go at specific times, but Tory, who's already been baptized, seems to be able to come and go freely without having to ask permission. I went back early with her.

Since I wanted to use the leftover chicken meat, Tory wasn't the only cook for the day. For round two of my plan to try to eat Japanese food, I wanted to make poultry sakamushi.[7] I thought that even though I don't have sake, it might have a similar feel to it if I use another type of alcohol.

"You said you want to use the leftover chicken, do you know what you want to make already?"
"Yeah, I want to make *'sakamushi'* out of bird meat, *'gnocchi'*, and a salad. How does that sound?"
"Umm… I don't really understand, but I'll leave it to you."

First up was the gnocchi. I boiled some tubers, mashed them, and mixed them with multigrain flour and a little bit of salt. Commoners don't have the budgetary freedom to use wheat flour as much as they want, so we use mixed-grain flour instead. It's a combination of rye, barley, and oats. I mixed it into a dough that's about as firm as my earlobe, rolled it out into a long tube, and started cutting it into one-centimeter pieces.

"If you don't mind," I asked, "could you take these things that I'm cutting out and flatten them out like this?" With a bit of difficulty, I use the back of a fork to spread out and flatten a chunk of dough.
"Got it," she said, with a big nod.

Spreading out the dough with a fork leaves ridges, so when it's rolled into a finger shape, it holds sauce very easily. One by one, Tory stretched out each piece of dough that I cut off. Since she has more strength than I do, every piece I cut off is stretched into the right shape in no time.

"Tory, you're way better at this than me."
"Really? …Maine, don't look at me, you just keep cutting. I'll run out if you don't, you know?"

I have Tory fill up a pot with water, put everything in, and bring it to a roiling boil. When they started floating to the top of the pot, they were finished. I took the leftover pomay soup

from last night, add more pomay to it, and stew it until it's reduced to a thick sauce. Right before it's time to eat, I'll mix the gnocchi with this sauce, but that's about all I can do on this for now.

"That's all for now, right? The salad comes together really quickly, too…"
"Mom will be home soon, so it's okay if we start the salad now, right?"

As Tory and I made the salad, our mother came home. As soon as I saw her come in, I went to the winter preparation room to fetch the breast meat I set aside yesterday so that I could start on the sakamushi. I'd left the meat in a room that's always cool, on a rock that was cool to the touch, but in this warm season, I was scared of it spoiling. Cautiously, I sniffed the meat.

…Alright, it didn't spoil. This is fine.

"Maine, will this pot do?"
"Yeah! Thanks, Tory. Since I seasoned this with salt and alcohol yesterday, we can get started immediately."

Since we don't have any pepper to use as a seasoning, I had no choice but to give up on making it spicy. The actual recipe is very simple. You season the breast meat with salt and alcohol, lightly grill just the surface, then put it in a pot with more alcohol and cover the lid to let it steam.

I thought that I should add the mushrooms I worked hard to gather up in the forest, to help bring out the flavor. I washed them clean, then lined them up on the cutting board. As I lifted my knife, Tory's eyes snapped up.

"Maine, stop! If you don't put those in the fire first, they'll dance!"
"Huh?"

No sooner than she had said that, she'd already started skewering the mushrooms from their base through the cap. Then, she sprinkled them lightly with salt and stuck them in the fire.

Dance? The *mushrooms* would? Like… how bonito flakes flutter in drifting steam? I did not understand what she said at all.

I doubtfully tilted my head to one side, trying to figure out what she meant. Tory pulled the lightly-toasted mushrooms from the fire, turned, and handed them back to me.

"Now they're okay," she says. "Th… thanks…?"

I decided that it was a strange turn of phrase, but if Tory said it was okay to use them now, then it must be okay. It's just one more strange foodstuff on the pile: a mushroom that requires extra care in preparation. I cut them up, taking care not to burn myself on the hot mushrooms.

“Mommy, can I use this alcohol for cooking? It won’t taste good if I don’t use enough of it, so I need about half a cupful.”
“Alright, here you go,” she says filling it halfway full.

I took the cup from her, then climbed up on a stool, stretching up on tiptoes to pour it into the iron pot. It hissed as it hit the hot metal, and I quickly covered the pot with a lid. When I heard it start to bubble, I removed it from the fire, cooking the chicken with just the heat still trapped in the metal of the pot.

“You’re taking it off already?”
“Yeah. I’m going to cook the meat for another ten minutes just using the heat in the pot. If I cook breast meat over a fire for too long, it’ll get all dry and hard to eat.”

I heated the pomay sauce I made from the leftover soup and the fresh gnocchi, then mix them together. Tory’s salad was finished as well. Just like the previous day’s dinner, we used shredded breast meat as a topping. I’m very pleased with how that meat turned out.

“Today’s dinner looks great too!”
“We’ll have to be sure to thank Al.”

Given the state of our budget, seeing so much food lined up on the table like that is a rare sight indeed. It’s a big deal to give someone a bird like that.

“I’m home,” said my father, walking through the door with a big smile on his face and high expectations for dinner. “Another delicious looking meal today!”

He told us about how much he was bragging about last night’s meal to his coworkers at the gate. I hoped that his overly-doting-father filter was making him massively exaggerate. I’d be much happier if it was all in his head. If it wasn’t, it’s going to make it a bit harder for me to go to the gates.

“Let’s dig in!”
“Whoa, amazing! This is delicious, Maine!”

Tory’s eyes went wide as she took a bite of sliced-up poultry sakamushi. As soon as my mother had one mouthful, she smiled brilliantly.

“It’s so simple to make, but this breast meat is so wonderfully tender. The flavor of the mushrooms has baked into it as well, it’s really delicious. Is it because we used good liquor, I wonder?”
“I think so. The whole dish brings out the depth of flavor of the honey wine.”

As soon as I said that, my father’s face went pale, and he dropped his fork with a clunk. He stood up and woodenly walked to the shelves, picking up the earthenware pot in which we store the alcohol. When he saw how much was missing from the small pot, his head suddenly dropped, and he looked like he was moments away from bursting into tears.

“…M, my precious alcohol got…”

Sorry, sorry. I mean, when I asked my mother for some alcohol, she said that it was something that he'd gone off and bought in secret, and that it would be such a shame if all of us couldn't enjoy how delicious it was. She had a bit of a wicked smile on her face when she said that, and I thought it would be best to just follow along through that unusual occurrence.

Since it was honey wine that I used, it had a different sort of sweetness than it would have if I'd used real sake, so once again it wasn't really much like Japanese food. It was another completely different thing.

Aaah, I really want Japanese food…

Although words like "dance", "struggle", and "danger" come up when talking about some of the ingredients here, it looks like I'm able to adapt the kinds of cooking that I'm familiar to this new world without any problems. On other days, I made a tuber-based gratin, a pseudo-risotto out of a grain kind of like buckwheat, and a quiche made on top of the stiff dough of the multigrain bread, all of which were well-received.

My family may like everything I make, but as for me, I can't stand this at all. Even if I'm making Western-style food, we don't have any spices or seasonings, and I'm starting to get very tired of the same sorts of flavors over and over again.

At the very least, give me pepper! I'd be overjoyed with curry powder!

There are still many tribulations ahead in my quest to better my culinary life.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

For the most part, I've left food and ingredient names untranslated unless there's a well-established English equivalent, as is usually done when talking about Japanese cooking. I've tried to phrase things so that things are as obvious as possible in context, but there are a few things that require basically immediate explanation.

1. Koji is a fermentation starter made of various molds, yeasts, and bacteria.
2. Dashi is a cooking stock made of kombu and bonito flakes.
3. Tsukemono are pickled vegetables, usually served as a side dish.
4. Shioyaki is a grilling method, particularly for fish, involving large quantities of salt and a very hot fire.
5. Nabe refers to several kinds of Japanese hot pots. The name is short for "nabemono", which is literally just "things in a pot".
6. Ponzu is a citrusy sauce used in a lot of Japanese cuisine.
7. Sakamushi is food (usually seafood) that's been steamed in sake.

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024The Road to the Meeting

After the bamboo exploded in the stove, I slip back into feverish nightmare, clutching my last remaining bamboo stick as I writhe in pain.

The anger of having something I made burned up. The vexation of that anger not being understood. The despair of having struggled so many times to make a book, yet never finishing one at all. Spreading through it all, a deep and profound weariness that makes me just want to let go of everything.

I don't care about anything anymore. I no longer have the willpower to fight back.

My mother burned my *mokkan*, When she burned the bamboo that Lutz had brought so I could make bamboo writing strips, though, I couldn't summon up any of that anger.

If only I was healthy. If only I was a strong, fit adult.

If I were an adult, I could have skipped over papyrus, clay tablets, and *mokkan*, and gone straight to making rice paper. At least, if I was as strong as Tory and Lutz, strong and fit enough to do real work, I could at least try. With this frail body and these weak child's hands, I can't cut up the wood I'd need in order to make real paper.

If I could just wait until I grew up, then maybe I could finally find my answer. But that's so, so far away. And still, even though I'm talking about growing up, will I really grow as much as everyone else? Hobbled by my lack of strength, will I really grow?

I can't even hope for that.

If everything is truly pointless, isn't it okay for me to just surrender to this fever that rages within me? In a place where I can't get a single book, is my fight to constantly endure living in this filthy, difficult world really worth it?

Maybe it's okay to just disappear.

It was a fleeting, accidental thought, but the fever surged forth anyway, sucking me deeper and deeper. A feeling spreads through me, a vague desire to just stop *thinking*, to let the fever swallow me whole.

I have only one regret. I won't be able to apologize to Lutz.

I won't be able to apologize for the fact that I couldn't use any of the bamboo, despite how hard he'd worked to find a nonflammable material I could use. The words he said to me when he'd left to go get me some bamboo drift through my mind.

"This is just so you'll introduce me to Otto! I'm paying you in advance, so you'd better get healthy! Got it?!"

I haven't fulfilled that promise. Even though he'd put in so much work for the sake of that

promise, is it okay for me to just pretend it never happened and run away into the depths of this fever?

Lutz did pay me in advance. It would be so simple to just fade away in this fever, but he gave me those bamboo strips, so I have to get better. I have to introduce him to Otto.

I tell myself that it's for Lutz's sake, and try to push the fever back down. I'd much rather keep my promise than be eaten alive. I need to put my affairs in order. I don't have time for thoughts like the one that flitted through my mind just a little while ago.

That's right, when I died in that earthquake, I wasn't ready for that at a… aaaaaaAAA! What happened to all those things I'd never gotten around to doing! NOOOOOO! I don't want this, I don't want this! This is awful! I can't just *die* here!

All the regrets from my previous life that I'd thought I'd already buried come clearly flashing through my mind. "Even though I died, dying is too much!" I cry, leaping to my feet. Somehow, the fever's been crammed back into a tiny little ball.

I shoved my last life's regrets back into the corner of my mind, and once again resolved not to think about them anymore. Now that I've finally been allowed to leave the house and accompany my father to the gates, I head to the duty room to meet Otto.

"Excuse me, Mister Otto, I asked you a favor, but then I got really sick…"

That's right: while I was laid out with fever, Otto's day off came and went, so he and Lutz weren't able to meet like I had promised.

"Squad Leader told me about how you were sick for five entire days. Are you alright?"
"Yeah!" I say, smiling. "Thanks to everyone." Otto frowns slightly, staring closely at my face. "Are you really okay? Your color's quite off."

The fact that I'm looking kind of pale is actually not the fever's fault. Rather, it's because it seems unlikely that I'll be able to make any paper.

"Aaah~, it's because there's something really troubling me that I can't figure out how to solve. …Mister Otto, can I ask what you'd do in my place?"
"Huh? You want to ask what I'd do if I had your problem?"

He glances at me briefly, his eyes round. Otto, during his time as a trader, must have accumulated so many experiences that I can't even imagine. There's a chance he might be able to think of something that I couldn't.

"Yeah. There's a thing that I really want right now, but since I'm not healthy and not strong, I can't make it myself. When I grow up, I think I'd be able to make it, but since my body's like this, I don't know if I'm going to be a healthy adult either, or if I'm even going to grow up as much as everyone else. Also, I really can't wait all that time. Mister Otto, what would you do if you were me?"

Otto nods along as he listens to my explanation. When I finish, he answers immediately, like he hardly needed to think about it at all.

"If you can't make it yourself," he says, raising his eyebrows a bit, "why don't you hire someone who can? Is that all that's bothering you?"
"Ah?!"

The scales have fallen from my eyes. I'd never even considered the concept of hiring someone to get me the things I wanted. As expected of a trader. I wonder why, though. I was certainly aware of the concept that I could be hired by someone, but it had never crossed my mind that someone could be hired by me.

"…That's an amazing idea, but I don't have the money for that."
"Well, if waiting until you do isn't possible, then… Hm. If it were me, I'd find someone who could do it, then subtly lead them along until they offered to do it of their own free will. It's not an easy thing to do, but if they do it without you directly asking, it won't hurt your budget at all."

He truly is a former merchant. His explanation is so eloquent, and his smile so genuine, but he's brilliantly wicked. I must have been happily lead along like that too, huh? My calculation abilities are quite high, but wasn't I saying that it seemed really easy on the budget to hire an assistant on a salary of slate pencils?

"……I'll follow your example."

Taking someone who looks like they could do something, then leading them along until they do it on their own initiative… is it? That seems like it would be really difficult for someone like me.

As I stew in my thoughts, Otto pats me on the shoulder and hands me my slate. He's clearly telling me that the conversation's over and that I should get to quietly studying.

"Ah, that's right! Maine, since you're feeling better, how about we meet the day after tomorrow, on my day off? We could meet at, hmm… the central plaza would do nicely. How about we meet there around the third bell?"
"I was just thinking about asking you. Thank you so much!"

Out of habit, I jot down a memo in the corner of my slate, reminding myself that we're meeting after the third bell. When I look back up, Otto is lightly rubbing his chin, smiling so widely that his eyes crinkle. For some reason, that smile sends a chill down my spine, like I'm looking at something dangerous. I reflexively straighten up in my seat and fix my gaze on him.

"Ahh, if it's someone you're personally introducing to me, he's got to be an interesting child. I'm looking forward to an enjoyable day off!"

Did he just say "don't bring someone boring, because it will ruin my precious day off", or was it my imagination? Huh? I thought this was going to be a casual meeting so that he could

talk about what it was like as a trader, right?

I cover up the sudden turbulence in my heart with a big smile and a nod, then I let my gaze drop down to my slate. I've broken out in something of a cold sweat.

This isn't good. I barely have any time before this meeting, and I don't even know what it's really about!

I grind my teeth with worry over how little time I have to prepare. We're meeting the day after tomorrow, so I really have no time. I can't ask, either; since I'm the one who is doing the introductions, I can't really say that I have no clue what the meeting is really for. As I diligently practice my vocabulary, my pencil clacking against the slate, I frantically try to think of what the meeting could possibly mean.

"Maine, we're heading home already."
"Daddy!"

It's rather early for us to be heading home, but when he calls for me I gather up my things and leave the duty room.

"Hey, Daddy. I told Mister Otto that I wanted to introduce him to Lutz, but what does an introduction like that mean?"
"Lutz would be looking around for an apprenticeship at about this time, right? I think that he'd do well to follow his older brothers into their line of work, but does he want to become a merchant?"

A job referral?! No, no, it's not supposed to be that heavy! I mean, a child like me can't possibly be part of anyone's network.

"He just said he wanted to ask some questions…"
"Right, so there's no doubt about it, he wanted a referral so he could ask about an apprenticeship. Your friend seems rather relentless."
"Relentless?"
"Of course. When we talk about hiring an apprentice, we're talking about looking after someone for a very long period of time. Even when you're fully independent, that's the kind of bond that can't ever be completely broken."

This is far more serious than I thought. Lutz is not just looking to ask some questions. It seems that, since he wants to become a trader, he wants Otto, a former trader, to introduce him to somebody.

Aaah, so in other words, the meeting the day after tomorrow is basically a job interview?! How did I have no idea this was going to be such an important meeting?!

After we returned home, I asked my mother and father about apprenticeships in detail. The next day, I load my basket full of cargo before I head to the forest, now fully aware of how serious this meeting is going to be. On our way to the forest, I explain to Lutz about the sad

fate of the bamboo strips, and let him know that the meeting with Otto was going to be tomorrow. He sighed when I told him about the bamboo, saying that it's definitely possible to mistake bamboo for vanihitz, and when I told him about the meeting he thanked me with honest delight.

When we reach the forest, everybody scatters to go about their gathering work. I, however, grab Lutz's hand, and drag him over to the river.

"Now then, Lutz. This is a good spot, so let's make sure you're nice and clean all over."
"Huh?"

Otto, because he was once a merchant, keeps a very tidy appearance. I think that it's best for Lutz to give the best possible impression that he can on his first meeting. Since I help Otto with his job so frequently, I am well aware of how calculating he is, just like a merchant. If I were in Lutz's shoes, I would want to show up to this meeting looking absolutely flawless. If he were to judge Lutz as without merit on their very first meeting, there's no way he'd even refer Lutz to a shopkeeper, let alone a trader.

"When you're meeting people for the first time, first impressions are really important! Since we have time to prepare, it's a really good idea to make sure we do everything right. If I were to judge you right now, based on what you look like, I wouldn't think very well of you."
"Even if I wash up, though, I don't think much is going to change."

It would be stellar if Lutz could borrow the nice clothes Ralph wore to his baptism, but I don't know if Ralph lend them to him. Neither Lutz nor I have much in the way of clothing, so there's not much we can do but wear our usual stuff, but if there's anything that we can improve, I want to improve it. Despite his stubbornness, I take out my simple all-in-one shampoo and get ready start working on his hair, explaining to him about how much of an effect one's appearance has on other people. I intend to polish him until he shines, so I lugged a bucket, some cloth, and a comb out with me to the forest. I don't intend to just wash his hair, though; I want his whole body clean.

I fill the bucket with water from the river and my simple shampoo, then I wash it through Lutz's hair over and over, like I usually do with Tory's. I keep talking with Lutz as I work, somehow feeling like some kind of hairdresser.

"So, Lutz. When you said you wanted to hear about being a trader, you really meant you wanted to *be* a trader, right? And since you want to be a trader, you wanted to be introduced to one?"
"Hm? Yeah."

I dry off his blonde hair with a cloth, which is now much glossier. It's such a beautiful color of gold that I wouldn't mind having it myself. As I comb it out, it only gets more radiant. Holding back my little bit of envy, I keep asking him questions.

"So, Lutz, when you become a trader, what do you want to do? Just travel around?"
"What's up with you all of a sudden?"

“You have to think carefully about it!”
“Why?”
“Mister Otto doesn’t know anything about you. You’re not being introduced by your parents or a relative who knows you super well, so you’re going to have to think of all of these answers yourself.”

From what my parents were telling me yesterday, it seems like in this town a child’s parents do the introductions when the child starts doing an internship. For that reason, a child’s job winds up being somehow related to one of their parents’ jobs. For example, my mother works as a dyer, so she introduced Tory to one of her friends from work, and got her an apprenticeship as a seamstress.

When a child has the same profession as their parent, they don’t tend to work at the same place, since it would be too easy for them to start relying on their parents too much. However, if the child enters a related profession, then their parents can rest easy knowing that their child is being supervised by someone they know, and the children work seriously because they know their parents will be hearing about it. It’s rare for a child like Lutz to want to work in a profession their parents are opposed to, and rarer still for them to be introduced by someone outside the family.

“Mister Otto is being really gracious in meeting you tomorrow, but it’s not because he’s super nice! He used to be a merchant, so he’s a person who thinks of everything in terms of profit and loss. If you show up without having thought any of this through, he’s not going to meet you a second time, I don’t think.”

Tomorrow’s meeting is a job interview. For an interview, you need to make sure your appearance is in order and that you know both what you want out of the job and what you think you can bring to it. If you don’t, there’s a good chance you won’t be taken seriously.

“…How about you, Maine?”
“Huh?”
“If someone were to ask you why you wanted to be a merchant, could you tell them immediately?”

Lutz scowls at me with pursed lips, perhaps because he couldn’t come up with his own answer immediately.

“Yeah. I want to sell paper. If I can be a merchant’s apprentice, then I could find someone to teach how to make paper, then I could have them make it for me.”

It’s all for my sake, because I want books. Until now, I’ve been thinking that I shouldn’t be relying on others, and I should do whatever I can to make something that I could reasonably substitute for books. However, at this point I am quite frankly at my limit. Now, what I want is for someone who can do all the labor, from beginning to end, while all I do is provide the knowledge. If I turn over the profits I’d ordinarily get for that information, I think I could find someone out there who would make it for me.

"Paper? I thought you wanted books, though?"
"You need paper if you want to make a book. And, you know, I don't think there's anyone else around here besides me who really wants books."
"If you're the only person who wants to buy books, then you're not going to be able to sell any, right?" he says, shocked.
I nod, with a big smile. "Yeah! Selling books isn't going to be that easy, I don't think. However, paper… I think I can make it for cheaper than parchment, so I think I'd be able to sell it. At the very least, I think there might be a merchant out there who would take me on once I showed him how to make it."
"…Huh. You've really thought this through, Maine. I'll have to think about it too."
"Since you're only Mister Otto's assistant's friend, it'll be really easy for him to turn you down. If you can clearly say what you want to do with yourself, though, and you can make them believe that it'll be profitable for them, then won't there be a merchant out there who'd take you on?"

While Lutz sits, deep in thought, scowling at the surface of the river, I use the time to wash up the rest of his body. We don't have the time to sit here and do nothing while we think.

Well before the third bell sounds, Lutz and I arrive at the town square, me looking like I always do and Lutz looking far nicer than usual. I had been hoping that Ralph would lend Lutz his nice clothing, but it seems that Ralph didn't want them to get dirty and refused.

"Hey, we're meeting at the third bell, right? Aren't we way too early?"
"That's okay! Being late would be absolutely fatal. Once we get there, we can sit and talk for a while, and it'll be time for the meeting before you know it."

The temple rings its bell regularly, in intervals of somewhere between two and three hours. I'm sure that being late to a meeting in a world without actual timepieces isn't as bad as I made it sound, but I want to avoid any sort of negative impression from having the two of us be late to a meeting we requested.

"That reminds me, yesterday, my mom was all, 'what did you do to your hair?', and she made a really big deal about it!"

With a deplorable look on his face, he tugs at a lock of his glossy blond hair. I understand exactly what his mother was thinking. If my son suddenly had smooth, shiny hair after a day out, I'd be curious too.

"Beauty is always the thing a woman is most fascinated by, after all."
"I told her you did it, so she should ask you if she wants to know."
"What?!"

I shrink back suddenly, my voice crying out in incredulity, a headache instantly forming as I realize that I'll never be free of Carla's unceasing barrage of questions once she gets a hold of me.

“I’ll tell her how to make it so she can do it herself. I don’t have very much of it anymore.”
“…Ah, sorry. If it’s that bad, you didn’t need to use it on me, you know?”
“That’s okay. You’re always the one helping me out, after all.”

I don’t mind using some of my simple shampoo on Lutz at all, since he’s been constantly assisting me, but I absolutely would mind giving it to Carla. After all, I’m already having to suffer with the fact that I can only wash my hair with shampoo once out of every five days and have to use plain water on the rest.

“But, still…”
“If it really bothers you, I wouldn’t mind if you helped me make some more. I’m way too weak, so I’m not very good at pressing oil.”
“What, is that it?”

As we talk, Otto comes into view near the entrance to the plaza. When he sees the two of us, he smiles broadly, but even from this far away I immediately realize what just happened.

Ahh, this really was a test.

Given that he gave such a fuzzy time as “around the third bell” while giving me that dangerous smile that put me so on edge, this really must have been a test to see whether or not we’d arrive well before the bell actually rang. Otto purses his lips just a little, then turns towards another part of the plaza and gives a big wave. Another man comes into view, and the two of them start walking towards us. Beads of cold sweat trickle down my spine, and I unconsciously grip Lutz’s hand tightly.

“They’re here, Lutz. Remember, introduce yourself first.”
“R… right.”

Judging from how the two of them are talking quietly to each other as they approach, I know that this is Otto’s friend, a merchant. He briefly glances at me, and I meet his eyes. They gleam with a sharp light, and I feel like my value is being appraised.

Nobody told me that Otto wasn’t going to be the only interviewer!
Aargh, it’s Lutz’s interview, but I’m the one getting super stressed, here!

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025Meeting With the Merchant

Making Lutz wash up, despite his protests, and having him make a last-minute effort to think up answers to the questions he might be asked in the interview, was absolutely the correct decision. Otto and his friend both have meticulous personal appearances, a significant cut above the rest of the people coming and going through the central plaza. As I thought, it would have been much better if Lutz and I could have gotten our hands on our older sibling's nice clothes.

Their clothing design is strange… no, their clothing design isn't what I'm used to seeing. The many layers of fabric draped over them show no signs of either stains or patches at all. This is not something I see very often at all in my daily life, where it's only natural to use the barest minimum of cloth and thread at all times. Based solely on his clothes, I imagine that Otto's friend is someone who makes quite a bit of money. His garments, his demeanor, that calculating look in his eyes, everything about him is vastly different than the shopkeepers I see in the town market.

When I say he looks like a merchant who makes a lot of money, I do not mean that it seems like he's the owner of an old, well-established shop. Rather, he moves with the force of the president of a venture firm in the middle of a tremendous rise. At first glance, he has curly, pale, milk-tea colored hair and gentle-looking features, but his red eyes overflow with self-confidence, and they glitter with the raw ferocity of a carnivorous beast.

"Hey there, Maine!" says Otto. "And you must be Lutz?"
"Good morning, Mister Otto. Yes, this is my friend Lutz. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today."

I'm not entirely sure what the most suitable way to greet him is, so I tap my chest with my fist twice in a salute, like I always do. Otto returns the salute, so I think that I didn't at least make a big mistake.

"Good morning, sirs, my name is Lutz. It is nice to meet you."

Lutz seems very nervous, but he refuses to give in to the intimidation of their discerning stares, and he recites the unfamiliar greeting without stammering and without a quiver in his voice. The first hurdle has been cleared.

"Benno," says Otto, "this is Maine, the girl who works as my assistant. She's my squad leader's daughter. Maine, this is Benno, an acquaintance from when I worked as a trader."
"Mister Benno, sir," I say, "My name is Maine. It is nice to meet you."

Despite the fact that I compulsively want to bow as I introduce myself, I don't forget that it's not customary in this culture to do so, and instead give him my best smile.

"You're quite polite!" says Benno. "I am Benno, nice to meet you." He looks over to Otto. "…She's quite well-mannered for such a small child."
"She's not as young as she looks," he clarifies. "She's six years old."

I probably look somewhere between three and four years old. Benno frowns slightly, then the corners of his mouth turn up in amusement as he glances over at Otto.

"…Your assistant's a girl who hasn't even been baptized?"
"Ahh, well, how should I put this. I'm teaching her to read and write so that she can become my assistant in the future."
"I thought you said before that she was already working as your assistant, did you not?"
"…Don't worry about it too much."

As they banter harmlessly back and forth, I notice that there's a lot of information being conveyed purely through subtext. Chills run down my spine. Are Lutz and I even capable of handling an interview with these people? What the hell. When he brought up that I haven't been baptized yet, I got the keen feeling that he was intimating that I wasn't actually capable of doing the work, and that Otto was simply going easy on me.

With a dubious expression on his face, he stares at a spot just above my eyes for a little bit, then opens his mouth to speak.

"I'm very curious about something that I'd like to ask about first, is that alright?"
"Yes, sir, what is it?"
"What's that rod you have in your hair?"

I see. Asking such a silly question after rejecting me would be hard, wouldn't it? Is this man perhaps already intending to dismiss me?

Forcing a smile onto my face, I quickly undo my hairpin and hand it over to him as he carefully studies me, seeming to get a lot of information out of every little move I make.

"This is a *'hairpin'*. I use it to keep my hair in place."

Otto seems to be curious as well, so they study my hairpin closely, looking it up and down, turning it around, and giving it careful scrutiny.

It's just a stick, you know? There's no gimmick or trick to it, you know?

"…It's just a stick, huh."
"Yes, it's a stick that I had my father whittle for me."
"And you're able to keep your hair in place with just this?"
"Yes, sir."

I take the hairpin back from him, then put my hair back up into its usual style. I gather up the half-up part of my hair, twist it around the hairpin, spin it until it's tight, then with a quick jerk fix everything in place. It's something I do every day, so I'm very practiced at doing it.

"Ohhhh… impressive!"

Lutz and Otto stare at me with wide eyes. This is the first time they've seen me as I put up my hair like this. Benno touches my hair, frowning slightly.

“Say, Maine. Your hair’s pretty impressive too. What do you put in it?”

His touch may be careful as he studies my hair, but the discerning gleam in his eyes is breathtakingly sharp. Between the glitter of profit in his eyes and the ferocity of the women’s questions back on baptism day, I can clearly see that my simple shampoo could be quite the valued commodity.

“It’s a combination of relatively common things, but the details are my secret.”
“Boy, you use the same thing?”
“Maine insisted on making my hair look nice yesterday…”

Ah, Mister Benno, did I hear your tongue click just now? Did you think that it would be easy to get us to teach you how it’s made, since we’re merely children? How unfortunate. I’m not going to play my high-value cards in a little skirmish like that; Lutz’s interview hasn’t even started yet.

Benno and I exchange smiles, mine sweet, his stiff. Otto lets out a little sigh, running his fingers back through his hair.

“Well then, Lutz. You said that you wanted to become a trader?”

The main question has arrived. Next to me, I hear Lutz’s breath catch as he gulps nervously. I sneakily reach over and squeeze his hand reassuringly, quietly cheering him on.

You’ve thought about this long and hard since last night, right? Now is the time to stand tall, Lutz! Tell us of your ambitions, and seize your victory!

“Ah, yes. I w—”
“Give it up.”
“Eh?”

Lutz was stopped before he could even start telling us what he wanted. In my heart, I scream. He worked so hard to come up with that answer, at least hear him out! Otto, however, looks like he’s swallowed a bug as he looks down at Lutz.

“Only an idiot would throw away his citizenship like that.”
“…Mister Otto, what do you mean by citizenship?”

The question slips out of my mouth before I even have time to think about it. This is the first time I’ve heard that word used here. I know that citizenship, in this context, would be the set of basic rights afforded to those who live in this city. Just like how you can still enjoy the rights granted to you by the Japanese constitution even if you haven’t studied them, there seem to be certain obvious rights granted to the citizens of this town. However, I have absolutely no idea what they could be.

“It means the right to live in the city. It’s also something that records your identity. When you turn seven and go to the temple to be baptized, your name will be registered, letting you work in the city, get married here, rent a house, and so on. The ways you can interact with

the city are vastly different when you do or do not have citizenship. Outsiders can register at the temple, be granted citizenship, and settle down here, but doing so is ludicrously expensive."
"Mister Otto, did you have to pay?"
He nods. "Yes, that's right," he says, smiling bitterly, perhaps in recollection.
Benno, next to him, points at Otto and laughs. "This guy sold everything he had so that he could stay here and marry Corinna!"
"I wanted to open up a shop here and continue selling things here if I could, but buying citizenship was an enormous effort that left me nearly broke."

I don't know how much money the average trader has saved up, but it looks like it's not enough to cover buying citizenship, paying for a wedding, and opening a shop.

"On top of that, a life on the road is vastly different compared to living in a town. Tell me, Lutz, do you have any idea what it means to live your life while riding on the back of a cart?"
"…No," he replies, slowly shaking his head.

It takes only two hours to walk across this town from end to end, so children in this town move around almost exclusively by walking. Lutz might have ridden in a hand-drawn wagon before, but he's probably never ridden in a horse-drawn cart before, and most likely has no idea at all what it's like to actually travel by cart.

"Let's take water, for example. When you need it right now, where do you get it?"
"From the well."
"Of course, right? But when you're on the road, there aren't any nice wells that are built for you. You'd have to start searching for places you can find water."
"There's rivers…"

When we go to the forest, we use the river as a source of water, so that's the first thing that pops into Lutz's head. However, when you're on the road, you aren't at all guaranteed to be traveling near a river. Plus, since paper is so expensive and hard to get, how many traders actually have maps to go by?

"Lutz," I say, "when you're just starting out as a trader, you're not going to know where those rivers are. There's no way you'll be able to follow the rivers all the time…"
"It's just like she says. That's why traders generally travel the same routes all the time. When you do, you make friends and contacts in the towns you visit, you can deal in information, and you start to learn where you can find water and the safe roads to travel on. Then, you teach that to your kids, and those kids take those same routes on when you retire. When you spend your days riding in a cramped cart like that, there's no room for another person in there. …Also, and this is the most important part, is where traders eventually end up. Lutz, do you know what a trader longs for, more than anything?"
"…"
"Citizenship."
"Huh?!"
"They want to give up their difficult lifestyle, and someday settle down in a town somewhere. They want to open a shop in a town and conduct their trade in safety. That's

what a trader dreams of. You're not going to find a single trader who'll take you on when you already have citizenship. If you absolutely want to do it, then you'll have to do it all on your own. There's no apprenticeship program for traders."

If citizenship is every trader's dream, then Otto's already fulfilled his. It seems like he really wanted to open a store here in the city, but I don't know why a merchant like him would give up on that and become a soldier instead.

"Mister Otto, why did you decide to become a soldier?"
"Wait," interjects Benno "no, don't… ngh!"

Otto puts his hand over Benno's mouth to silence him, then grandly, majestically states his answer.

"It was all so that I can marry Corinna!"
"Ooh," I say, "I want to hear everything about this!"
Benno, in a panic, tries to shush me. "*I* don't want to hear *anything* about this, young lady."

Otto, however, starts his story, his eyes glittering. "That's right," he says, "this happened was just after I became an adult. I was passing through this town when I caught a glimpse of Corinna, and it was love at first sight! It was like an arrow through my heart, or a flash of divine inspiration, but all I could see in that moment was her. I couldn't marry anyone else but her, I thought, so at that very moment I started to woo her."
"…Mister Otto, that's unexpectedly passionate of you."

This former merchant, who hides his darkly calculating nature underneath a gentle smile, seems to be a passionate romantic. The color of his black tea-colored hair and his light brown eyes gives him such a composed, honest image that I never could have imagined he could pour out such passion.

"She was just so charming that I couldn't help it. So, I resolutely made my advances, but at first she rejected me. You see, she's a seamstress famous for her excellent skills, and on top of that she treasures the bonds she has with everyone here. She told me that she couldn't live her life on the road."

Ahh, of course. If you have a stable life, with enough skill and enough regular customers to earn a steady income, you won't be able to abandon it all for an unstable life of travel. Plus, looking at it from Corinna's perspective, wouldn't a trader suddenly walking up to her and trying to woo her seem very suspicious? Surely she'd be wondering if that was some kind of con, wouldn't she?

I nod along intently as I listen while Otto's love story starts to heat up. He starts putting more and more passion in his voice, and his gestures start getting bigger and bigger.

"Corinna said she planning on marrying a man from this city, and a shock like thunder came crashing through my brain. The thought of Corinna marrying another man was completely unimaginable! After frantically trying to figure out what I needed to do, I immediately marched over to the temple and obtained my citizenship."

“Huh? Wait a minute. Weren’t you letting your passions run a little too wild?”

I look over at Benno, wondering if Otto’s actions were at all normal by this world’s standards. Benno has his hand to his head, squeezing on his temples, an exhausted expression on his face.

“…See, even a child can see it! On top of that, the money he spent on his citizenship was all of the money he had been saving to go back to the city where his parents lived and open up a shop, right?”
“What?!”

He then explains that if you purchase citizenship in the town where your parents had citizenship, the price would be reduced by more than half, so the rest of the money could be used to open up a shop. For a trader to spend so much time amassing enough money to retire from his uncertain existence and move up to owning a shop, then spontaneously spend it all in one go on a woman he had just met… those are not the actions of a calculating merchant, but of a wild stallion who has eyes for nothing but his beloved.

“I wanted to open a shop in this town, but I didn’t have enough money left over to afford one, and I didn’t yet have any connections in this town that would lend me enough money. I had to quit my job as a merchant, then became a soldier in order to show Corinna my dedication to live in this town. I asked a favor of the squad leader who I’d made friends with after seeing him every time I came to this town, and he got me hired for a position that primarily involved a lot of paperwork. …By the way, when I bought my citizenship, became a soldier, and proposed, Corinna was shocked!”

Well, uh, it is rather shocking. I don’t think a single young woman of marriageable age exists who *wouldn’t* be shocked if someone were to sell everything they have, buy a citizenship, and become a soldier just because she told him that she couldn’t live a life on the road. I want to hear things from Corinna’s viewpoint, whether she thought Otto should have reined himself in or whether her chest tightened as she wondered what about her could be so captivating. I’m absolutely sure her story is going to be very different from Otto’s.

“I kept chasing after her for many days, until I finally married her, which felt a little like being adopted into her family. She was so cute when she laughingly told me she couldn’t help falling for me after all that time! And, now…”

After that, he starts going on and on about how adorable his wife is. There was no stopping him. I really want him to *not* use the first-class sales pitch skills he honed during his career as a merchant when describing his wife. Lutz is left completely flabbergasted by the deluge of praise. I’ve heard of husbands so devoted that they’d never lay eyes on another woman, but I thought it was fathers who were so prone to exaggeration like this. These exaggerations, though, are pretty harmless.

What should I do about this? I had no idea Otto was this kind of person.

I look over at Benno, silently pleading for help. Our eyes met for a brief instant, then he

clapped a hand on Otto's shoulder and sighed lightly. He looks like he's had practice at this.

"Otto, you stopped talking about being a trader a while ago, you know! That's enough about your wife, get back to the main topic."
"Ahem! Sorry. So, as I was saying, give up on being a trader."

I want to make a sarcastic quip about his use of "as I was saying", but I force myself to keep my mouth shut. He may have gotten significantly derailed, but now I know that there's no apprenticeship system for traders, the life of a trader is fraught with difficulty, the citizenship Lutz and I possess is extremely important, and that drowning in love is absolutely terrifying.

After being so plainly told to give up, Lutz gloomily hangs his head, looking so sad as to be almost pitiable. He'd spent so long thinking about his reasons for becoming a trader, but before he could get a single word out, he was told that his dream was impossible. After being beaten over the head about how difficult a trader's life is (and how awesome Otto's wife is), it's only natural to be so sad.

"…Lutz," says Otto, "this was Maine's suggestion, but instead of becoming a trader, how about doing your apprenticeship under a merchant? You'll eventually be able to leave the town on your own to go purchase supplies."
"Maine?!"

Lutz raises his head abruptly, turning to look at me. Rage flares up in his green eyes, accusing me of having known all along that they were going to tell him he couldn't be a trader.

"I thought that you should really hear it from the mouth of an actual trader," I say. "I've lived in this town all my life, so would you even believe me if I told you to stop?"
"…Ah."

From the look on his face, I've hit the bullseye. He looks away, seemingly lamenting about how unfair life is.

"When I asked Mister Otto about it, I thought that being a trader sounded way too difficult, so I started wondering is there was a job that would let you travel out of town that your parents wouldn't object to. Also, I might have just heard about this now, but I think you should stop thinking about letting go of your citizenship so that you could be a trader."
"…I guess you're right."

Now that he's heard Otto say it, it looks like he's really letting it sink in. The fanciful tales he heard from people traveling from out of town truly are entirely different from the harsh reality of being a trader.

"Daddy told me that Mister Otto has connections to some of the merchants in this city, so I asked him if he'd be willing to introduce you to someone, if you wanted it. It's your choice, though, you know?"
"…Oh, wow. You've really thought this through."

Benno looks up, letting out a deep breath. I look up as well, watching him closely. If Lutz

wants to be introduced to a merchant, then the opponent he needs to beat isn't Otto. It's Benno.

"So," he says, "it seems we've been introduced, but… kid, do you want to become a merchant?"
"Yes, sir!"

Lutz nods, and Benno smiles widely, his reddish-brown eyes narrowing. The light-hearted atmosphere from when Otto was bragging about his wife has completely blown away. Not a wisp of it remains. Benno looks down at Lutz like a carnivorous beast, his cruel eyes fixed on the opponent he will beat into submission.

"Hmm! Well now, what will you sell? If you become a merchant, what kind of things do you want to sell?"
"Um?!"

It's only natural to be asked questions about your aspirations during a job interview, but the ambitions that Lutz spent yesterday contemplating were all about being a trader. To be suddenly forced to spin those around into reasons for wanting to be a merchant's apprentice instead is no trivial matter at all.

"I'm asking you what you want to do when you become a trader, and if you can even do it."
"Um, I…"

Eeek! This is a very high-stakes interview to be giving to a child who isn't even old enough to be baptized!

I want to say that he's not being as cruel as he seems, but for a merchant, taking on another apprentice means incurring a lot of additional expense. Also, Lutz is only the friend of Otto's assistant. Benno doesn't have any obligation to take on such a large burden. If Lutz doesn't show his willpower, his determination, his knowledge about what goods he might be able to sell, and his ability to be of some use to Benno, then nobody could possibly complain if Benno cuts off the conversation right now. From Benno's standpoint, the fact that he agreed to this meeting is something that Lutz should be grateful for.

"If you don't have anything, this conversation is over."

Lutz drops his head slightly, chewing nervously on his lips. I don't know if I should say anything. I don't know if it'll be a lifeboat for him, or a step down a painful path he shouldn't tread, but it's ultimately up to him. In a low voice only he can hear, I quietly ask him a question.

"…Could you make my paper?"
"Yeah." "Hmm?"

Lutz suddenly looks up, grabbing my hand and squeezing it tight. I can feel him trembling, but the firm glare he fixes on Benno burns with raw ferocity.

“Of course I’ve got something I want to do! I’m going to make everything that Maine comes up with!”
“Yeah,” I say, “he’s always been helping me.”
“Maine can barely do anything by herself, so I’m going to do it for her.”

Lutz, that was a great job. You said it perfectly. Benno’s eyes have gone wide.

I haven’t the slightest idea if any of this happened because I was the one dragging Lutz along or if he was the one dragging me along, but if Lutz is going to take on all of the things that I can’t do, then I’ll take on all of the things that he can’t do either.

Unlike Lutz, I already have *plenty* of experience with taking entrance examinations and applying for job interviews.

I calmly look up at Benno, a smile on my face. I take a slow breath and let it out gently, getting my breathing in order, then open my mouth to speak.

“I have an idea for a kind of paper that I’d like to sell, one that doesn’t use any animal skin. I believe that I can get its production cost down below that of parchment, so I think that it will be a very profitable good to sell.”

As I talk, Benno’s face turns sour, like he’s swallowed a particularly bitter bug. When he turns to look at me, his eyes glow with an even more ferocious light then he did when he was staring down Lutz.

“…You want to become a merchant as well?” he asks, in a low voice that almost sounds like a growl.
“Yes, sir!” I nod, smiling brightly. “It’s my number two aspiration, though.”

Next to Benno, Otto doubtfully tilts his head to the side.

“Is your number one aspiration doing paperwork at the gate?”
“No, sir, it’s to become a *'librarian’*.”

As soon as I say it, all three of them look at me in unison, identically dubious expressions on each of their faces. It looks like they really didn’t understand that word.

“…I’ve never heard of that.”
“I mean that I want to manage the books in a place that has a lot of them.”

After I finish my simple explanation of a librarian’s job, Benno suddenly bursts out in riotous laughter.

“A… ahahaha! There’s no way you can do a job like that if you’re not a member of the nobility!”
“…Really? I thought that was the case.”

Those damn noblemen.

If it's a fundamental truth that it's only the nobility that has books, then I think it's only natural for the librarian who manages those books to be a member of the nobility as well. I never had any real expectations about it, but this reminder of my difference in social status is still really irritating.

"Even so, a paper that isn't parchment, huh… Do you have any of it?"

When he glances back down at me, his eyes are bright and alert. Most likely, thoughts of how much profit could be made if I really could make paper without using parchment are tumbling around in his head.

"I haven't made any yet, sir."
"Then don't be ridiculous."

He may be telling me not to say ridiculous things, but there's no mistaking that his interest has been piqued. I think we're just one word away from finding some common ground. I smile even wider.

"If actual paper is what you want to see, then we'll make it. Our baptismal ceremony is summer of next year, so by spring we'll have a prototype of my paper design, and then I hope that you'll be the judge of whether or not we can actually make it."
"…Alright then."

I have somehow managed to wrangle an extension out of Benno, despite the fact that he came here with the full intention of dismissing us outright. This truly is an amazing victory.

"Thank you very much, Mister Benno."
"We still haven't settled on anything yet."
"Even so, I'm grateful that you've given us the chance to prove ourselves."

All that's left is up to Lutz's persistence. I think that he's going to work extra-hard, knowing that my job is at stake as well. It may have been sudden, but I can't help but smile at the fact that it suddenly looks like I'll be able to obtain real paper.

"Lutz, let's do our best!"
"Yeah!"

Lutz and I also convey our gratitude to Otto, with big smiles. Thanks to him, Lutz has given up on his dream of becoming a trader, and has taken his first step towards becoming a merchant's apprentice. Out of all of the outcomes I'd considered, this is by far the best one.

"Mister Otto, thank you very much for introducing us to Mister Benno."
"You made my day off very fun! Looking forward to seeing you at the gates next time!"
"Me too!"

We somehow managed to get passing marks from Otto as well. I let a big sigh of relief. I pick up on the hint in Otto's last remark, realizing that it's time to break up the meeting, and start to leave the town square with Lutz.

…Ah, I almost forgot.

I stop walking after just one step, then turn back around to call after Otto and Benno as they walk away.

“Um! Mister Otto, Mister Benno, I have something to ask!”
“Sure, what is it?”
“Do either of you know of a sickness that can cause a fever that can suddenly spread throughout your body, then shrink back down again?”

Between Otto, who has been to many places in his life, and Benno, who has many connections around the area, it’s possible that one of them might have heard of something like the fevers I have.

“It felt like it got big enough to swallow me whole, but then I frantically fought against it and forced it back into a tiny shape. I’m sorry that this is such a subjective description…”
“Who knows? I haven’t heard of it,” says Otto, loosely shaking his head.

Benno looks off to the side, glances down at the ground, then slowly starts shaking his head too.

“…I don’t know.”

If this is something that even those two don’t know about, then I don’t think I can find someone who knows anything more. My illness must really be rare, then.

…Could this disease actually be extremely dangerous?

As I entertain this touch of anxiety, the meeting comes to a close.

026Interlude: My Assistant

My name is Otto. I am the man who loves my beautiful, adorable wife Corinna the most in the whole wide world.

Her hair is the color of cream, and the irises of her eyes are gray. Each of her pale colors adds to the gentle, pure atmosphere that floats around her. The bridge of her nose may be long, but she's so cute when she worries about how the plumpness of her cheeks makes her look a little bit baby-faced. She's so lovely when she laughingly tells me that she doesn't know what she's going to do about me. She smells great when I hold her close, her huge breasts squishing up against me. She's the best.

I'll shout it from the top of the world! My Corinna is the best woman in the world!

Today, at the behest of my helper Maine, I met Lutz, a young boy who said that he wanted to become a trader. I gently hit him with the harsh truth of reality, leaving his dreams smashed into tiny pieces.

"I'm home, Corinna!" I call out. "Benno's with me too."
"Welcome back, dear. …So, even after bullying children that haven't even been baptized, you can still come home with a smile like that."
"She's so cute even when she's pouting!"

I unintentionally blurt out my inner thoughts. Corinna looks at me in shock, then lets out a long sigh. This is a regular sort of shock, so I just shrug my shoulders and explain myself. I really had no intention to bully those children, so it's not like what I did could be considered bullying. All I did was talk to a child who still believed in fairy tales and told him about how reality truly works.

"I didn't have a choice. There's nothing good about becoming a trader, after all. Sure, I had to shatter his dreams completely, but it was for his own good."
"I guess so, but…"

Corinna looks down at the ground with her gray eyes, her eyebrows knitting together in concern and pity. Seeing my Corinna worrying about another man, even if he's just a child, makes my heart tremble, though just a little bit.

"You're such a kind person, Corinna. You're so worried about a child you haven't even met…" I grab onto her shoulders and hug her close, just ready to kiss her.
"You're blocking the door, Otto," says Benno, crossly, from behind me. "Actually go in the house, please."

Corinna, looking a little flustered, shoves me off to the side and shows Benno in.

"Come in, big brother! …You look quite depressed, are you maybe feeling guilty about rejecting those children?"

Deep lines are carved between Benno's knotted eyebrows, and not a single trace of his usual affable demeanor can be found in his expression at all. Contrary to what Corinna is thinking, Benno actually didn't wind up rejecting Lutz, so, of course, his gloomy mood has nothing to do with guilt at all.

"No, no, Corinna, it's not that," I say. "He tried to drive away Lutz after the boy said he wanted to become a merchant's apprentice, but Lutz wouldn't be driven away. Maine set forth a few conditions, and Benno actually accepted them. She completely turned the tables on him. That's why he's depressed."
"Otto…" says Benno in a low, warning voice. I ignore him and head into the house with Corinna.

He must be feeling the effects of being done in by a child. This is great. Savor this, Benno. This is how I feel every time Maine does something shocking to me.

As we walk towards the parlor, I embrace Corinna from behind, and kiss her lovely cream-colored hair over and over. Benno clenches his fist, telling us that we should wait to do that until he's not around. Even though I want to be mad at him for interrupting our couple's time, but if I were to actually say that in front of Corinna, she'd tell me to cut it out immediately, so I bite my tongue.

The parlor is typically where Corinna entertains her customers. She works hard to keep it very clean so that she can use it whenever a customer may happen to come by. In the center of the room stands a round table, unlike the one in the dining room. Four chairs are set around it. Since the use of cloth for things besides just clothing is the mark of a wealthy individual, this parlor has much more cloth in it than any other room in the house. For instance, display shelves are arranged along the right wall, showing the patterns that Corinna can make, On the left wall, a vividly colored tapestry has been hung, sewed together out of leftover cloth.

I don't usually come into this room, since I rarely need to, but it's fun for me to just look at it, since it's decorated with Corinna's handiwork. I sit down at the table opposite from Benno, broadly grinning at him.

"Well! That really was an unexpected turn of events! I never would have thought that Benno would make a compromise…"
"What? Benno did?" asks Corinna, her gray eyes going wide. "Otto, you have to tell me everything!"

She's so cute when she pesters me with those wide eyes. Also, after she sits down on the chair next to me, she scoots it just a little bit closer. She really is adorable.

It's rare for Corinna to pester me like this, so I cheerfully recount the day's events to her, applauding Maine in my heart for her efforts.

When I finish with my story, Corinna looks at her brother, her eyes wide.

“He made himself look as good as he could before he met you, then showed up in the plaza to wait for you long before the bell actually rang… Benno, weren’t you losing that fight from the very beginning?”
“Shut up…”

Benno’s mood is only growing more and more foul. Even as he pours the liquor Corinna had brought out down his throat, the knot between his eyebrows doesn’t loosen even the slightest. Both maintaining at least a minimum level of personal grooming and making sure you arrive earlier than the person you’re requesting a favor of to avoid making them wait are obvious, basic things for a merchant. Benno thought that he could see how prepared Lutz actually was based on whether or not he could do those basic things, but Lutz actually cleared both of those hurdles.

It was, however, probably Maine’s doing.

From expression that flashed across her face the moment she saw us enter the plaza, I can’t think of anything else. Today’s victor was clearly Maine, and, thanks to that, I got to see a scene where Benno was forced to make a compromise.

“Well! Thanks to Maine, today was much more fun than I thought it was going to be!”
“You’re talking about your squad leader’s daughter, right? The one you said was extremely bright.”
“Yeah, that’s right. Even though it’s been nearly half a year since I made her my assistant, I still don’t have a good grip on her. She’s so peculiar that I can’t help but wonder how a child like her could have been raised.”

As a trader, I went to many different places and met with many different people of many different social positions, and Maine’s peculiarities stand out from all of them. Benno, my companion for the day, has similar experience; as a merchant, he knows many people of note. If you think of my breadth of knowledge as wide, but shallow, Benno’s is narrow, but deep.

“Hey, Otto,” he says. “What *was* that?”
“I told you already, that was my assistant.”
“No, I get that, but don’t lie to me: was that really a soldier’s daughter?”
“No doubt about that at all… but I, for one, think it’s strange.”
“How so?” asks Corinna, head tilted to one side in wonder.

Usually, when I tell her about my day, I mention a few things about Maine, like how she’s smart, or how she’s frail, and so on, but this is the first time I’ve ever described her as strange. After all, I think she’s so strange that you can’t truly understand just how strange she is unless you see her for yourself.

“First of all, her appearance is unusual. She keeps herself so tidy that you’d never think she was ever a soldier’s daughter. The clothes she wears aren’t all that different than what you see on other children like her; old, worn-out, and patched in places. Her skin and hair, though, are so clean that they shine. The squad leader is a man that looks just about the

same as all the other soldiers, but neither of his daughters are slightly dirty like he is, and their hair is glossy."
"Surely their mother must be helping them take care of their skin and hair, then?"

Corinna was raised as the daughter of a wealthy merchant, so even if she's seen how poor people live, she really can't truly grasp what it's really like. Putting effort into taking care of your skin and hair requires time, money, and supplies. Poor people have none of those things in abundance at all.

"…I last saw their mother this past winter, but she didn't seem like she was taking the initiative to put in that kind of effort. She is, though, so beautiful that she's really wasted on the squad leader."

During a clear winter's day, Maine stayed at the gates for a while so that her family could collect paru. When her mother came to pick up her daughter, I didn't get the impression that she was remarkably tidy. All I really noticed was that she looked a lot like Maine, and that she was beautiful.

"Ohhh, is that so?" says Corinna, an amused twinkle in her gray eyes. It's very rare for me to compliment other women. "Of course, you're the best woman in my whole wide world, and that will never, ever change!"
"Yes, yes, dear, that's quite enough. …So, Benno, did Maine seem strange to you too?"

Benno puts his glass down, leans back in his chair, and looks up at a beam holding up the ceiling. Slowly, he takes a breath.

"Yeah. Her hair, the color of the night sky, was so glossy that it almost seemed to glow, her skin was an untarnished white, and her hands did not look like those of someone who lives a life of manual labor. Her teeth were white, too. The beat-up dress she was wearing matched her so poorly that it almost looked forced, no matter how I looked at it."
"Wait… hair so glossy that it almost seemed to glow?! What did she do to make it do that?!"
"Huh?" I say, blinking in surprise. "Corinna, but you're already so beautiful just as you are!"
"Quiet, Otto! I'm talking to my brother."

To women, it seems that the shininess of one's hair is a matter of utmost importance. It's rare for Corinna to express this much interest in something that's not related to sewing.

"It looked like she'd put something in it, but she didn't tell me what exactly she'd used."
"Benno, she said it was a secret," I added.
"Otto, do you think you'll be able to ask her about it?" asked Corinna.
"…Yes, but she's probably going to be on guard from now on, so I don't think I'll be able to get an answer."

Corinna wants to know what Maine does to her hair. For Corinna's sake, I'll ask Maine about it the next time I see her, even though I'm certain it's useless.

"Aside from her hair," I say, "I think that the reason her hands are so clean is because her body is so small and weak that she can't be of much help around the house. The whiteness

of her skin is probably because she gets sick at a moment's notice, so she doesn't go outside very often and thus doesn't get a lot of sun. Honestly, she's only really started to be healthy enough to go outside since this spring."
"…Now that you mention it, we cancelled the meeting last time because she had a fever, didn't she?"

I nod, unable to keep off my face a faint expression of irritation as I remember how jumpy and distracted the squad leader was during his daughter's five-day fever.

"So, in other words, Maine's appearance is due to her weak constitution?" asks Corinna. "That's not quite enough to call her strange, isn't it?"

It seems that Corinna has decided this isn't that big of a deal after hearing all of this. She shrugs her shoulders, looking like she's rapidly losing interest.

Benno shakes his head. "No, it's not just her appearance that's strange. What stood out to me was her posture and her speech. …Those were something that she couldn't have mastered without very good upbringing at home. Otto, don't tell me that she had such a strict upbringing because her parents are disgraced former members of the nobility?"

I wouldn't draw that conclusion about the squad leader's family circumstances. If you look at the rest of Maine's family, it's quite obvious whether or not they have any connections to the aristocracy.

"The squad leader has one more daughter, who is perfectly ordinary. Her hair is unusually glossy and her skin is relatively clean, though, but that's it. She's not so far beyond her peers as Maine is."

Benno nods slightly, then looks over to Corinna.

"Corinna," he says, "that girl doesn't just look strange. She had the courage to maintain eye contact when I was staring her down, was crafty enough to protect her advantages with regards to the secret behind her hair, was able to feed me a wild bluff without anything to back it up, and even negotiated terms… none of those things are things I'd expect from a child that hasn't even been baptized."
"A child that doesn't flinch away under *your* glare, Benno?!" asks Corinna, her eyes wide. "That child is strange. Without any doubt, that child is strange.""

When Benno starts to lay on the coercion, his eyes grow sharp like a predator's. Benno is the eldest son of the family and Corinna is the youngest daughter, so when they lost their father while Corinna was still very young, Benno stepped in to raise her in his place. He scolded her a lot whenever she got immature, and the fact that even to this day she still averts her eyes is a sign of how scary Benno can get.

"A~ah, her memory and calculation ability are also amazing!" I say. "Now that I think about it, when I gave her my slate, she surprised me again. She picked up the slate pencil and started writing immediately, without anyone even needing to show her how to hold it! It's almost like she already knew how to write."

“Did she maybe learn by watching you?” asks Corinna, her head tilted to the side in thought.

She glances down briefly, noticing that my glass is empty, and pours me another. I take a mouthful, hesitating about how I should answer. It’s true that I showed her how by example, but…

“Writing isn’t something that you can just simply start doing after watching someone else, especially with how smoothly she was writing right from the start. I train all of the new apprentice soldiers in how to write every season, so I know how difficult it is to learn. When they first start, they can barely draw a line, let alone write a single letter.”
“Ahh, that’s right…”

Corinna has instructed quite a few apprentices of her own in a variety of things, so she knows how rare it is for someone to be able to learn how to do something just by watching.

“Her calculation abilities are also very strange. She said that she learned how to read numbers when her mother took her to the town market, but surely it’s impossible for someone to learn how to do math just from being taught the numbers, right?”
“Well,” says Benno, “the apprentices who come to me already know a little bit of math. It’s something their parents teach them, you know?”

The children who become apprentice merchants are generally the children of merchants themselves, so it’s not uncommon for the children to know how to read, write, and do basic math by the time they go through their baptismal ceremony. When I was a child, traveling with my trader parents, they taught me math and writing. Maine’s calculation abilities, however, are on an entirely different level.

“It’s not just a little bit of math. The south gate’s financial report calculates the quantity and costs of all of the equipment that we’ll need over the course of the year, right? These aren’t the tiny numbers you see at the town market, these are very significant sums once you start adding them all up, and she was able to just start doing those calculations like it was an everyday sort of thing. Also, she didn’t even need to use a calculator[1], she just worked everything out on her slate.”
“…That really isn’t something that you make an assistant do, usually? Letting a kid like her work on your financial report.”

I shoot a glare towards an amused Benno. For the sake of shocking them, I then tell them something that I’ve never told anyone before.

“Don’t tell anyone I ever said this, but I think I could trust her to do about seventy percent of the financial report on her own.”
“…What?!”
“…Seventy percent… Otto…”

They’re even more surprised than I thought they were going to be. Their faces have gone rigid and their eyes have gone wide with shock. I can’t help but start laughing.

“And it’s only seventy percent because there’s vocabulary words she doesn’t know yet! And it only gets worse. When I was away from the office, she was able to perfectly handle what needed to be done when someone came through with a letter of introduction from a nobleman.”

That had been shocking. I had been in a meeting that day, where my squad leader was constantly, restlessly, nervously fidgeting in his seat because he was missing the baptismal ceremony for his beloved daughter. When that let out, Maine came to me to give a report: a merchant carrying a letter of recommendation from a low-ranking member of the nobility was waiting for processing.

Essentially, when a visitor comes through with a letter of introduction from one nobleman to another, we want to accommodate them as quickly as possible, validating their information and letting them through into the town. Even if they’re commoners, they should still be treated like low-ranking noblemen. That day, the meeting I was in had been called by a high-ranking nobleman. Of course, when having to decide what to prioritize, a high-ranking nobleman’s request comes before that of a low-ranking nobleman’s. However, if we were to mistreat a guest, then they’d get furious at how rude we were being, brandish their low-ranking noble’s letter of introduction like a shield, barge into our meeting, infuriate the high-ranking nobleman present, and make an enormous mess out of everything.

Instead, Maine directed the merchant, who was not a nobleman, to the waiting room for low-ranking noblemen, tickling his sense of self-conceit, then explained the fact that the ranking officials were in the middle of a meeting called by a high-ranking nobleman. Then, immediately after the meeting finished, she came to deliver a report so that there would be no misunderstandings with the leading private and the merchant could be swiftly processed through. She did all of this by instructing a new recruit what to do, despite the fact that he was so flustered that he was practically useless. It was perfect.

“What an amazing girl, isn’t she?” says Corinna.
“Amazing, hmm… more like strange. Weird. However, I think that Squad Leader Gunther hasn’t paid much attention to her peculiarities. From his perspective, I think he just sees her as his adorable, frail little girl. If I hadn’t told him that I wanted her to be my assistant, nobody would have noticed her excellence, would they? Even now, he says things like ‘my little girl is so clever!’ without, I think, actually realizing how abnormally clever she really is.”
“It’s a good thing he’s so slow, isn’t it!” laughs Otto. “If she weirded him out, it wouldn’t be strange at all for him to throw her away!”
Corinna frowns, sadly. “Don’t joke about things like that. I don’t even want to imagine it.”
“It’s alright, Corinna,” I say, with a comforting smile. “Even if the squad leader did get weirded out, and if she were to be thrown out, then maybe Benno could adopt her instead. After all, she’s so brilliant that she was able to turn the tables on him completely.”

Corinna softly smiles at that. Yep, as I thought, Corinna is way cuter when she smiles.

“Hey,” says Benno, lightly drumming his fingers on the table, “do you think that girl’s going to be able to make that paper?” As he looks at me, I notice that his eyes once again are filled with a merchant’s shrewd gleam.

“A kind of paper that isn’t parchment, was it? I think she can definitely do it.”
“You’ve got a lot of faith in her, huh?”
“Hmmm… earlier, she told me that there was something she wanted immediately, and she really wanted to make it, but she didn’t have the strength to do it herself… could it be that? I told her that she could always try to convince someone to do it for her if she couldn’t do it herself. If Lutz is going to be her hands and feet, moving as she directs, then she’ll be able to complete it.”

She told me that she regretted how little strength and stamina she had, which means that she must already know how she wanted to make it. Then, she declared that she was going to be able to make it, as if she knew her probability of success was high. Most likely, that wasn’t a bluff.

“…If she actually does this, it’ll turn the town’s market upside down. How am I going to handle this girl?”
“Are you thinking of taking her on yourself?”

From what Benno is saying, it sounds like he’s thinking about taking on not just Lutz as an apprentice, but Maine as well. It’s just a guess, but when I say it out loud, Benno’s eyes go wide.

“Of course! You thin I could let a something like that fall into someone else’s hands?! Just what kinds of things is she capable of making by herself? That 'hairpin’ she wore, whatever product she uses in her hair, paper that isn’t parchment… and that’s just the things that I know about from today! She has to have even more ideas secreted away. She is a calamity that could singlehandedly throw the entire market into chaos.”
“Wait a minute! That’s *my* apprentice! You can’t just steal her like that!”

I don’t think that Benno’s claim is wrong, but I do have objections. I’ve spent the last half-year training her, raising her so that she can unleash her full potential on the year-end budget reports. There’s no way I’m just going to stand idly by as Benno snatches her away from me. Benno, however, lets out a snort of laughter, puckering his lips into a smug sort of smile.

“She said that becoming a merchant was her number-two aspiration. She has no interest in being your assistant! You’ve only been training her for, what, half a year? Find someone else, Otto.”
“Where am I going to find someone else who can be trained into usefulness in half a year?! Maine can think of things, Lutz can make those things, so then there’s no problem at all with her continuing to work at the gate, is there?!”

I’m especially not going to surrender her during budget season. Benno and I glare at each other with all our might, willing the other to capitulate. I grab my cup, and pound back the rest of my drink.

“Of course there is!” Benno roars. “I’m going to make her contract with the merchant’s guild. I can’t risk her getting snatched up by someone else.”

“Think about her health, then! Working with the merchant’s guild will be impossible!”
“Her health?”

Benno deflates, like he’s suddenly exhausted. I see an opening, and immediately hammer home my point.

“Her constitution is so weak that she’s almost shockingly feeble, right? Getting her to do any sort of work that involves her body would be impossible!”
“...She’s that frail, huh?”
“Yeah, when she went to a nearby village on pig-slaughtering day, she suddenly collapsed. The squad leader brought her back to the night duty room so she could rest. That was the first time I really came into contact with her. I thought that she was going to be fine, since she was in a warm room with a fireplace, so I gave her a slate so she could kill some time and left her alone. Not even one bell later, she got a fever and collapsed again.”
“Uh?”

I needed to stand watch that day, so I’d left her next to the fireplace in the night duty room for a while. When I came back in to check on her, she’d collapsed due to fever. When the squad leader came to pick her up, he told me to pay it no mind, because it happened all the time. Her extreme feebleness seems to be something her family just kind of accepts by now.

“When spring came around, it was awful for her. She couldn’t even walk on her own from her house to the gate.”
“Wait… to the gate?” asks Benno.
“No matter where your house is in this town, making it to the gate isn’t really very far, you know?” adds Corinna.

The city is surrounded on all sides by a wall, so the town itself isn’t actually all that big. Even going at a child’s pace, going from the west gate to the east gate shouldn’t take more than one bell’s worth of time.

“That’s right, the squad leader’s house isn’t particularly far from the south gate. However, that didn’t do Maine any good. She’d get exhausted about halfway there, and after the squad leader carried her the rest of the way in his arms, she was laid out in the duty room, unable to move, all the way until noon. After that, she’d usually have to stay in bed for another two or three days.”
“Hey, that… is she really alright? Won’t she just *die* if she has to do any work?”

I can’t at all say that I’m not afraid of that. In particular, Benno is always full of vigor, and his workplace is so busy that it’s always brimming with raw energy. I can’t imagine that being a place where Maine would be fit to work.

“Well, by the time spring was halfway through, she was finally able to make it all the way to the gate, and she needed to stay in bed far less than before. When spring was over, she was able to make it all the way out to the forest, but I think she still doesn’t have the strength to do any ordinary work. So, I was thinking that she should work at the gate, where doing paperwork is her sole responsibility and she can take care of herself…”

“Mm…”

I’d said she had a weak constitution, but it seems like Benno hadn’t thought that she was quite so frail. He furrows his brow as he contemplates. He might be figuring out how to change course now that he knows that all of his previous plans aren’t going to work out for him. If that’s the case, then I should probably give him one more piece of information.

“Lutz is the one who’s always been keeping an eye on Maine. Whenever she got separated from the rest of the children coming back from the forest, Lutz stayed behind to escort her all the way back. The squad leader gave him some pocket money for it, but I think he did it because of his strong sense of loyalty and responsibility.”

Lutz is at that age where most boys just want to run around wildly, but he’s instead always accompanying Maine. That’s not something that just anyone could do. Incidentally, I don’t have any strong sense of loyalty like that; there’s nobody to whom I’m devoted besides Corinna.

“…I can’t fathom all of that girl’s abnormalities, but that boy is pretty strange too,” says Benno.
“Hm?”

Benno rubs his chin lightly, looking like he’s just remembered something. Gradually, an unpleasant expression creeps onto his face.

“It wasn’t just the girl who was able to stand up to my stare and clearly state their own opinions. Moreover, most people would ordinarily see a sickly girl like that as trouble, but he seems to treat her like he’s her guardian? He stood in front of her, like he was trying to protect her from me. Despite that, though, as soon as she started negotiating with me, he stepped back like it was only natural for him to do so.”
“Yeah, now that you mention it…”

Just like Benno said, after he clearly made his declaration, he handed the reins over to Maine as she made the proposal. This doesn’t seem to me like the usual sort of protector/protectee relationship. What kind of relationship could they possibly have?

“There aren’t very many kids who think about when they should step forward or when they should let someone else do the talking. On top of that, even though I couldn’t get any information out of the girl, she tells him everything so that he can make things for her. If I only had the girl, I wouldn’t be able to get information out of her, so it would be meaningless. If I only had the boy, then the girl would find someone else to make her things for her, so that would be meaningless too. It’s much better to keep those two as a set.”

I can’t help but smile when I see the sharpness of Benno’s merchant’s intuition. He didn’t just notice Maine, he also sized up how useful Lutz was, and after meeting the two of them just once, he so clearly noticed all of those things about them. He’s as quick-witted as they come.

“You’ve got a keen sense of smell as always… The squad leader seems to put a lot of trust in

Lutz as well. He seems to be the person who has the greatest influence on her. He's there for her right when she collapses, and he can prevent her from running amok to chase things outside her reach by skillfully helping her out."
"Hmm, if he's able to confidently state that he'll make everything that Maine can come up with, then he must have something to back that up."

Lutz had said something about how Maine was always like that. There's probably even more things that Maine has done that I'm not even aware of.

"I think they've probably made some other weird things together, probably. Didn't they mention something called 'clay tablets'?"
"…Weird things? Damn, I have no idea what kind of things they could be making! Regardless, those two are a single set. I'll take them both. I'll surrender neither of them to you."

With a single stroke, the subject was settled. Corinna stands up from her chair, leaving to go start preparing dinner. She leaves behind a lamp for the table, a small cask in case we wanted to refill our drinks, and some snacks to go with our liquor. As I gnaw on the slightly salty jerky, I look over at Benno pouring himself another drink.

"Hey, Benno. Do you have any idea of what Maine was asking about, that wriggling sort of fever inside her body?"
"…"
"I've never heard of a fever that thrashes around inside your body like that, feeling like it's going to consume you."

From his reaction when Maine asked the question, I think he might have some inkling of what might be happening, and from his reaction now, I think he really does know something. His eyes are raised, just a little bit, as if he's worried about whether or not he should say anything. After spending a while in contemplation, he mutters something in a voice that's almost too quiet to hear.

"It might be… the devouring. I don't have any proof, though."
"…The devouring? What's that?"
"It's not an illness. It's where you let too much mana build up in you with nothing to use it on. It eats you from the inside, then you die."
"Wh… what?! Isn't mana something that only the nobility have?"

My eyes fly open as soon as I hear that rare word. Mana is not a thing that commoners have. It's a mysterious and powerful force. It's not something that's seen frequently, so I don't know much about it at all, but it's said you can change the course of nations if you have enough of it. That's why those who possess mana are the nobility, governing the country at the top.

"…It's not common, but there are people outside of the nobility who have mana. However, the magical implements needed to release that mana are very expensive, so it's more accurate to say that only the nobility have the ability to properly *use* their mana."

Benno is quickly rising through a company with connections to the nobility, so his knowledge about the workings of this country is much deeper than mine.

"Huh! Maine has mana. I wonder if that's why she's so strange?"
"Didn't I just say that I have no proof? If it's the devouring, though, that would explain why she's so small for her age and why she collapses so frequently."
"Is mana so hazardous?"

I had thought that mana was a wondrous, useful, but mysterious thing, but if Maine's weakness is the result of magic, then I wonder if it's something dangerous as well.

"If this somehow really is the devouring… yeah. If it's the devouring, and she can't release that mana, that girl is… going to die very soon."
"Wh–?!"

An image of Maine's doting father flashes into my mind, and I'm hit with a feeling like a bucket of cold water was dumped over me. I stare at Benno in shock. From the serious expression on his face, this doesn't look like any sort of joke or friendly banter.

"It seems that mana builds up in someone as they grow up, and it starts to devour their heart. There are many commoners who don't have access to magical implements who just simply die before they're even baptized."
"Is there anything she can do?"

If anyone knows of a good solution to this problem, it would be Benno. As I plaintively ask for advice, he combs his fingers back through his hair, then lets out a sigh.

"If she had the backing of a noble, then they could lend her a magical implement and postpone her death. …However, she'd effectively be theirs until she died. She'd only be living for the sake of using her power for that noble. Between dying surrounded by her family or living her entire life as a noble's pet, I don't know which I would rather choose."
"…"

There was no salvation in anything he just said. To be honest, I have no idea which of those two I'd pick, either. I don't want to die, but I also am deeply concerned that being a nobleman's pet for life would be equally awful.

"It's a somewhat different story if you can keep the built-up power pinned down with your willpower. A child, though, doesn't have the sheer force of will to be able to keep that up indefinitely. …I wonder how that girl will do?"
"…"

Just looking at Maine, I can tell that she has much more willpower than other kids her age. However, I don't know if even she'll be able to hold down her mana long enough to keep the devouring at bay. She seems to be keeping it in check for now, but if her mana keeps growing as she does, then I don't think anyone could have any idea about when she might finally reach her limit.

“Otto, don’t look so serious. We still don’t actually know if it’s the devouring. Look at it this way: if it really was, she’d be very close to death. Do you think she’d be able to walk around outside if that were actually the case?”
“I… guess so…”

A tiny bit of relief and a heavy pile of anxiety simultaneously crash through my heart.

That’s right, Maine has seemed close to death countless times. She may be able to walk around outside now, but that was the result of her enormous struggle during the spring. Before that, I hear that she really wasn’t able to go out like that.

Is she really going to be okay? I don’t know whether I should tell the squad leader about this or not.

Inexpressible emotions tumble around in my chest, and I down the rest of my drink.

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. The word Otto uses is indeed the word for “calculator” (計算機), although he’s referring to the wooden counting device he used a few chapters ago. In modern English, we say calculator to refer to an electronic calculator, but it still does actually mean “a device that calculates”.

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